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Sisters, Secrets, Subjectivities
A Narrative Inquiry into Sistering

Christine Scarlett

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol
in accordance with the requirements of the degree of
Doctorate of Education in Narrative and Life Story
Research in the Graduate Faculty of Education**

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Abstract

This dissertation presents a fictionalised performative autoethnographic narrative inquiry into sistering. 'Sistering' refers here to the social relationships existing between two females who are in a sibling relationship with each other. My theoretical underpinning for the interrogation of sistering draws on poststructuralist feminist theory, informed by a sociological perspective founded on a view that the most useful way to seek to understand our selves and our social world is through the employment of a sociological imagination; that is to demonstrate an interconnection between personal biography and the society in which we live out our lives. Sistering is a mostly invisible relationship, marginalised by mainstream discourses which centre on *family* and *siblings*. I argue that this problematises the development of a voice and a language which women can utilise to share and theorise their experiences of sistering. My research is intended to address this by demonstrating, through a case study told in narrative form, that sistering is a social experience through which females learn a gendered subjectivity. I interrogate this construction through relations of power, subjective agency and change within an intimate and complex social tie. My methodology reflects feminist theorising which is predicated upon a view that knowledge derived from our experience as women is as equally valid as knowledge derived from traditional epistemologies. I argue that the language of a performative autoethnographic narrative inquiry is particularly suited to my theoretical positioning and subject material. Further I am concerned to contribute to the development of a body of knowledge in relation to sistering which is accessible to others who have an interest in sisters and sistering. Narrative research lends itself to this project. This, then, is one narrative, told through the reflexive gaze of one woman, of how two women 'did' their sistering.

'Who am I? I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am everything that happens after I'm gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', everyone of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.' Salman Rushdie (1981) *Midnight's Children*, p 370, London, Jonathan Cape.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

I dedicate this work with love and gratitude to my children Ben and Clare and to my grandchildren Elliot and Lucas.

I must give a comprehensive thank you to everyone who has given me support, help, sustenance and friendly criticism along the way. You all know who you are. More particularly I thank the University of Bristol teaching team on the Ed. D. in Narrative and Life Story research for their teaching which was both rigorous and inspiring. I thank the University Library staff who excelled themselves in providing books and support to a mainly distance learning student, as well as thanks to the Graduate School of Education administrative staff for their unfailing courtesy and kindness in dealing with my queries and requests. I would also like to give a heartfelt thank you to all my fellow students who I met over the course of this doctorate and who gave to me in their friendship, encouragement and shared intellectual excitement and creativity far more than I can say. More personally I would like to thank the following people. Thanks and much gratitude to Helen Drucquer. She knows why. Thanks also to Helen Barraclough, Cath Emery, Ann Farrington and Ros Ramsden for acting as a reading group at the final draft stage, giving me their considerable literary expertise along with their time and encouragement. I want to give Cath Emery a special thanks as my oldest friend in the group and who was able to provide a thoughtful and knowledgeable perspective covering thirty years. Special thanks too to Ros Ramsden who managed to combine walks and wonderful tea rooms with a professional insightfulness on my narrative which made a real contribution to my own understanding. Thanks to Sheila Abdullah, Cath Cirket, Helen Davies, Maggie Eyre, Romola Guiton, Joy Pascoe, Jenny Powell, Ann Rangecroft, Marilyn Tsorvias and Gwen Wilson, for sharing their stories of sistering when they had some, and for their consistent interest, encouragement and insights over these years. Special thanks to Annie Winner for so much; for working with me on writing about various aspects of sistering and getting me to think it through more clearly, for her generosity in sharing her own story of being a sister, for her unqualified support and compassion which she gave me when I found the going hard. Further special thanks to Wilma Fraser to whom I owe a great deal, not least the indefatigable encouragement to get cracking on a doctorate and to stay with it when I appeared to be falling off the perch; for her literary and academic insights combined with professional judgement; her reading of innumerable drafts and writings with me; the long distance discussions and the close companionship; and above all to have been on significant parts of this sistering journey with me, bearing the scars to prove it, and still be talking to me. I thank her from my heart. I wish particularly to thank Jane Speedy who has acted as supervisor for my doctorate. Her teaching and espousal of narrative inquiry proved irresistible and it is her I have to thank for steering me in the direction of narrative research generally and autoethnographical inquiry in particular. I am profoundly grateful to her for the door which this opened up for me and the chance to discover the joy of narrative inquiry as a means of social and personal exploration. As well, I want to thank her for her inspirational supervision of which her unique e-mails were just one enjoyable aspect. I want to give my greatest thanks my children and my husband. To Ben and Clare, for their love and encouragement which they have given to me every inch of the way, even though some of the remembering has not been easy for them. And finally to Mike, who has run alongside me on this marathon with a cheerfulness I sometimes have not deserved and has forborne to point out with heroic restraint that he didn't actually choose to sign up for it. For all the discussions, the professional insights, the re-readings, the suggestions, the patient IT support in the face of my electronic incompetence and the cups of tea and suppers in the face of my flagging, I give him my thanks and love.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in the dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original, except where indicated by reference in the footnotes, and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other academic award. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed C. Seale

Date 21 July 2011

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Foreword

This dissertation presents a fictionalised account of an autoethnographic narrative about a sistering relationship with an analytical and theorising commentary being offered in the footnotes running alongside the text. This approach raises both methodological and ethical issues on the one hand and on the other, makes particular demands upon the reader. I wish to highlight these concerns prior to the text being read.

So, to the ethical issues. Writing about family members and their shared stories with the writer is tricky, an undertaking not to be done lightly. We risk disclosing confidential information, invading privacy, and giving a version which the protagonists of the narrative may well dispute or reject. The writer may seem to be inviting judgement or criticism of family members in their absence, or to be privileging the self at others' expense. Moreover, if it is the case, as it is here, that one of the key protagonists of the narrative is unaware of their appearance in a research text, then the concerns are significantly increased. Given the thorny, if not impenetrable, ethical thicket raised by such concerns, two related questions require an answer. What is the justification for writing such a piece of research? And if having satisfactorily answered *that* question, how does the writer then construct a narrative which safeguards the interests and privacy of the unknowing participants?

I give one answer in justifying the writing of this research narrative in the final sentence of the Prologue. I write that secrets, if ever spilt, can bring about transformations. Or to put it another way, researching into a little known, rarely discussed, but commonly experienced familial relationship can make a contribution to the transformation of others' understanding of themselves and their lives. I happen to believe that this is an essential requirement of research activity. If there is to be any value to our research over and above the satisfying of our own curiosity and unanswered questions, it is that it speaks to others' concerns and questionings also. Further, I would say that this requirement demands that we, as researchers, stand up and bear witness. So I suggest that there is a moral imperative at work here, one which I accept and seek to discharge through my autoethnographic narrative research into sistering.

There is another point to consider, one which was brought home to me clearly in my conversations with women who were sisters and who expressed a strong interest in engaging with the issues I raise in my work. The stark fact is that my sistering relationship has an ending, or at least as far as one can be certain of anything the future may hold for us. As much as this is the cause of some personal grief for me, I began to recognise that it gave me a space for reflection and analysis which other women in extant sistering relationships do not have. This point was not lost on those women who engaged me with their own sistering stories, and their interest and support and encouragement bolstered up my courage to give voice to this narrative telling.

The decision made, I constructed a narrative in which my overriding concern was to safeguard the participants. This has led to a fictionalised performative telling. And by this I mean that all the characters have been given pseudonyms; that locations, venues and time frames have been deliberately altered; that some incidents are fictive, a product of my imagination and not my experience. I have invented some dialogue and put words into people's mouths. I have imaginatively put myself into other's shoes and imputed to them feelings and viewpoints which

come from my sense of those people and not the people themselves. In doing all this I have tried to hold fast to a verisimilitude, that is, a truthfulness which gives voice to the essential truths of my story and to other participants' tellings of their stories. I am particularly scrupulous in this respect in telling, or more accurately, re-telling, my sister's story recounted in the Prologue in which I have reported as faithfully as I can my sister's understanding of events as she described them to me.

This leads me to comment on other methodological issues which the text raises. I wished to write an engaging, evocative, and crucially, accessible narrative which could be read as a 'story' and that meant the theorising, analysis, questionings, went into the footnotes. This means that they are an integral part of the text and are not an optional extra. They contain a crucial underpinning of the narrative and must be read in conjunction with it. I accept that this makes a demand on the reader in order to engage with my writing, but one I hope the reader agrees is worth making by the end.

I use a mix of first and third person tellings throughout the narrative. I wished to give as much weight as I could to my sister's voice and found this worked better when using the third person. It helped to provide a more balanced positioning between the two of us. I move into first person voice when I want to highlight a particularly significant part of the narrative and to make it clear to the reader that this is of deeply felt significance to me, the writer. I change the fonts deliberately to highlight the switch between first and third person tellings.

I have included an extensive References and Bibliography section and this has been done deliberately. The body of the text may be taken simply as a narrative telling but it is underpinned by a great deal of research, reading and scholarship. The message to the reader is that this is research, not story telling. My References section should also indicate the wide-ranging nature of my literature search. Given the relative paucity of texts written specifically on sistering I undertook a wide sweep of texts which crossed over several disciplines and genres. Writing about a little-researched topic from one's own perspective can prove to be a more, rather than less, challenging academic undertaking than other more traditional research endeavours.

A final comment, and arguably the most fundamental. The following narrative is my story and mine alone. It is my version of events and my interpretation of those events. There are many more, different, contradictory, and equally valid tellings to be had of these same events, some of them no doubt from me, if I were to write this again at a different time, for a different purpose. Narrative research is subjective, partial, fluid, tentative, reflexive. I ask the reader to take this thought with them, and to keep it with them, throughout the reading of this text.

Prologue

The year is 1949, the place a reservoir carved from flooded Pennine valleys, and surrounded by millstone moorland, undisturbed, silent, beautiful in its sombre way, lonely. Moorland sheep, hardy in their thick wool coats, move quietly in the heather, working their way across the moor. An occasional bird, disturbed, flies up clattering and drops back. The deserted road snakes around and over the hills, giving it its name. In the winter months this road is impassable, feet high with snowdrift, but today it is spring, the air warm with an eggshell sky, a patchwork stain of clouds.

The road lies empty, bare of traffic or humans. This is usual for long periods in 1949, for there are only a few private cars which will take this road, the occasional charabanc, more often a farm tractor or wagon, or livestock being moved. One can drive upon this road, or tramp the moor beside it, and see no-one at all.

But today is different. We are only minutes away from understanding how different this day will be.

For here comes a black Austin car approaching the reservoir from the east. It has begun its journey in the industrial city which borders this landscape and its destination is a still larger city across the western ridge of Pennine bog and moor. The driver of the car is of interest to us for we would perhaps assume that a privately owned car in this year of 1949 would belong to, be driven by, a man of means, marked out by accent and demeanour as belonging to the middle class, a doctor perhaps on his rounds, or a vet

visiting the outlying farms. This driver does not fit with those assumptions. He is a big, strongly made man, around forty years in age. His still handsome face is calm, he appears content, tranquil even, relaxed, enjoying the activity of driving which he does well. His bright blue eyes, full of intelligence, glance appreciatively at the surrounding landscape. But something about his body, his hold on the steering wheel alerts the observer to speculate that this man is from a labouring background.

Yes. It is the hands. Massive, hard-muscled, scarred, with broken skin and ragged unclean nails, these hands rest lightly on the steering wheel. Such hands have seen decades of hard physical work, and given some knowledge about the city from which the car has journeyed, the observer can surmise that this man has spent some time in that city's steelworks. And indeed this is so, or rather, in the forge, a place marked out by this man and others in that city as a workplace set apart from, and higher than, a steelworks, by the historic nature of its task and by the apprenticed skill of its blacksmiths.¹ Any labourer can find work in a steelworks, but the forge required men whose fathers and grandfathers have done their time in the infernal crucible, who apprenticed their young sons and oversaw their work; who were capable of building muscle and brute strength and who could last out a shift, a working life, in the brutal heat, the liquefying blaze of the forge.²

¹ There used to be something called the 'aristocracy of labour', a concept much argued over by Marxist historians. The main source of the theory is Lenin, at pains to explain the quiescence of the British proletariat (Moorhouse 1978). Most Marxists agreed to differ on the fluidity and vagueness of the concept as did manual workers themselves, but loosely defined it as referring to an upper or favourable position inside the working class based on the level and regularity of wages, and the degree of skill or training (apprenticeships) required for the job. Being born into a northern English working class family in the 1940s meant that the fine gradations of manual occupational status were absorbed along with the smog and coal dust.

² The physique of blacksmiths was legendary in working class life. If a youth was slightly built when he started his apprenticeship he either did not cope with the job

Such is the man driving this car towards the reservoir. *His* car, for this is a man who has lived at home with parents until his mid thirties, a man who has saved his modest wages over many years, neither drinking, smoking, gambling, nor womanising. Indeed, not socialising either, for this man is a loner, best suited to his own company and interests. Moreover, this is a man who craves status denied him by his birth, education, occupation.³ A working man who can buy a car in the 1930s as he has done is a man to be reckoned with, to be looked up to, to be given the respect which is due. There is a certain telltale arrogance in his body, the way the hands rest on the steering wheel. Driving a car is an easy task those hands seem to say, and preferable, much more preferable, to pounding a ten pound hammer on white hot steel with the furnace heat scorching torso, head, hair. Far easier to manipulate a car gear lever than to plunge burning metal into water, gasp in the searing steam, streaming face and eyes, deafened by the massive drop hammer nearby whose rhythm can be heard across the city. Here he sits in his own car wearing his decent pair of trousers instead of a leather apron soaking with water, clinging to his breeched legs.

Yes. This is a man who is content, satisfied with his world and himself. A man who has time to stop and enjoy the surrounding beauty, a landscape he

and left or he filled out to the impressive physique which the work required (Kristof 1993). This was true of my father, an immensely strong, powerfully built man. Such a physical build of course has a wider significance in family and community circles where patriarchal notions of masculinity segue only too easily into a dominant status underpinned by the threat of brute strength. Blacksmiths often commanded an intimidating presence.

³ Literature gives us a rich exploration of the frustrated aspirations in working class males including Braine (1957), Greenwood (1935), London (1912) and Sillitoe (1958) whilst cultural, sociological and social history texts such as Hoggart (1957), Seabrook (1982) and Thompson (1963) provide other insights. My father's story included a marked artistic ability which so impressed his teacher and local vicar at the Church of England village school he attended that they requested permission from his parents to enter his work into a scholarship competition for a place at the Art School. They were refused. Walter was going into the forge and that was all there was to it.

has loved since a boy, cycling through its villages and valleys, just his dog loping along beside him. Kinder, Mam Tor, Dovedale, Lathkill Dale, and further afield, the Manifold valley and the Staffordshire Roaches. He knew this valley before it was flooded, has cycled many a time through the village now lying at the bottom of this dam. Cottages, a church with steeple, post office, all covered now in green crusted slime, fathoms deep, undetected by an onlooker's gaze.

By the end of this day something else may also lie there, undetected, unsuspected for decades to come.

For the moment this man relishes being at one with nature, with himself, in control of his own destiny. He is his own man, own boss, beholden to no one. No one except the Lord of course. The forge was a living hell for him, from the first to the last. The day of his fourteenth birthday and his father and uncle, blacksmiths both, took him down the valley to the forge, a three miles walk out of the Derbyshire village on the city's edge where he has scrumped for apples, stolen birds' eggs, put tadpoles in the teacher's drinking pot. A country boy's childhood. His birthday gift - to crawl underneath a furnace, dead but searingly hot still, crawl into the belly of the monster and clean out the ashes, the clinker. A job always given to the new boy, the smallest boy. A cruel initiation by hard men in a brutal environment. Terrified, sick with fear, it never left him, never got easier or less frightening.

Oh, the accidents he has seen. The terrible screams he has heard, sick to his stomach from the stench of burning flesh, witness to another scarred man, a damaged life, a family made fatherless. He has been lucky in his time at the

forge. And careful. Oh yes, careful enough to get himself sacked. Refusing to work on a machine he knew to be dangerous, had seen another man ripped apart by. No, he would not work on it, no matter what the foreman threatened. That gaffer had had it in for him, had always disliked him, not 'one of the lads' he was told, with his pious, preaching ways, his refusal to play a hand of cards and take a beer when firefighting duty meant they stayed at the forge throughout the Blitz. Oh yes, he had told them at the time that gambling and drinking were not the Lord's way and he had reported them for their sinful ways. He did not seek popularity, only righteousness.

So the foreman got him sacked. But then something unexpected happened. The men he had worked with, had reported on, went on strike to get him back his job. Well, there was a thing. Such a to-do. Strikes were illegal in wartime but they stuck it out, the gaffers had to back down and he was given a choice – old job back or leave the forge if he wished. He would never have another chance to get out, so he walked, there and then.⁴ Not a backward glance at his astonished workmates, bitter at his betrayal of their loyalty, their decency. What did he care? They were nothing to him. The Lord had

⁴ See Pelling (1979) for an interrogation of the high price which was paid for being part of a labour aristocracy. He points to the high accident rates as well as diseases that went with these jobs. As well, there is the impact of World War Two to consider, and my father's job designation of 'reserved occupation', a category introduced in 1938 which covered five million workers across a wide range of occupations. These jobs were no soft alternative to going to war, with long and difficult working hours, fire fighting duty on top, and some like my father located in highly dangerous workplaces which were a prime target for bombing raids. (See www.bbc.co.uk/WW2peopleswar/timeline/factfiles.) He was hugely frustrated by his reserved job status and applied to join the RAF, already fascinated by the new technology of 'radar' which he wanted to work with. He was turned down and his chance to move away from his limiting background into a bigger world, to be broadened and educated by a wider experience, to find a challenge for his undoubted intelligence and talents to flourish was denied him. I have long felt that Walter would have been a very different man if he had been able to follow this path and his life would have been much for the better. So would ours.

shown him the right thing to do. He had prayed long and hard and the Lord had guided him into a new life.

He had found work as a travelling salesman with a large company and discovered himself to have a talent for it. This is where he found his charm, his easy conversational manner, his talent for telling a good story. The end of the first year saw a bonus for coming top in sales and so he had said thank you very much and left, seventeen pounds in his hand. He had gone straight to Manchester, searching for a modern 'line' to get him started, settled on egg timers which the landladies of Blackpool snapped up in a trice in their bid for the perfect boiled egg to please their lodgers.⁵

That was the start of it. His business, The Straight Deal Agency, a title which came to him during a prayer meeting, the Lord guiding him once more. Yes, the other great event in his life has been to find the Lord. The Elim Foursquare Pentecostal Church is now firmly established in the city following the Crusader Campaign in '38.⁶ A revivalist protestant church, begun in Northern Ireland a decade or so previously,

⁵ Various studies (see Goldthorpe et al. 1969) show that there was a surge in social mobility in the middle decades of the twentieth century in Britain, as manual jobs declined and more professional and managerial jobs opened up. Manual working class men like my father, without educational or other cultural resources to draw on, hoped that self-employment would open up a modest chink in the class structure through which to slip.

⁶ See Wilson (1961; 1990). The Elim Church developed in Northern Ireland around the time of the First World War. It took root in a period of political upheaval and insecurity, economic recession and wider political sectarianism. It was spread throughout England and Wales employing the old revivalist techniques of Wesley and others during the period of deepening economic depression and poverty which characterised the 1930s in the UK. As Wilson argues fundamentalist creeds appear to flourish best in specific social groups to which relatively sophisticated public opinion does not penetrate. Pentecostalism is predominantly the religion of the poor and dispossessed, the choice of the disinherited. His study showed a large proportion of members employed in manual occupations with a low educational attainment. Membership of this sect and its central tenets exerted an overwhelming influence on my father to the end of his life and dominated our home environment. Winterson (1985) gives a superb literary take on this. Such beliefs extend far

suckled by sectarian bigotry, nurtured by hellfire conviction, found a ready convert in this man. For it chimed with his own rigidity, his own sense of absolutes, of right and wrong, sinful and saved, which his own father had taken pains to pound into him and worse. Who is to say if, aged four, being locked in a cellar for two days and nights for breaking his sister's doll was what tipped him towards later religious certainties? Or if it was his diphtheria two years later which almost carried him off in the city's isolation hospital, sobbing for his mother for six long weeks, forbidden by her husband to visit her child. A child deserving of punishment for disobeying his father's order not to crawl through a toxic sewerage pipe to find out where it went.

Or who is to say that, again, it offered balm to his damaged ego, his broken self esteem, negated by casual cruelty inflicted by an ignorant man onto a once sensitive and intelligent boy?⁷ Whatever. Now his faith made him one of The Elect, one of The Chosen. He felt, in a muddled but sure kind of way that it marked him out as someone to be taken seriously, to be recognized as being of some worth. He has been washed in the blood of the Lamb. By

beyond conventional forms of spiritual practice, especially when held by men positioned within an unchallenged patriarchal culture where they serve to justify and reinforce the subordination of females. A combination of non-negotiable religious belief coupled with unquestioned patriarchal behaviour by a father also equipped with an intimidating masculine physique produced an overwhelming challenge to my sister, myself and our mother, and powerfully shaped our eager response to the emergent women's movement in the 1970s (in a word, hurrah!).

⁷ Gerhardt (2010) gives a useful insight from a psychological standpoint into the attraction of fundamentalism. 'When children grow up feeling powerless and uncared for, they may become adults who are drawn to groups with authoritarian structures, such as ...religious sects. Their hope is that by submitting to something bigger and more powerful, they will become safe and cared for' (p 244). She quotes Hedges (2007) who argues that people 'can bury their chaotic and fragmented personalities and live with the illusion that they are now strong, whole and protected' (p 245). Gerhardt suggests that becoming part of an exclusive 'in group' provides an outlet for buried childhood rage at being neglected and hurt which can be vented onto an 'out group', and that fundamentalist thinking is characterised as being closed and predicated on a lack of self-awareness.

bending his knee at the foot of the Cross he has lifted himself up to his rightful place. Deacon of the church, along with his new business, and now a family man with wife and children.

A shadow of unease passes over his face and he glances at the small girl sitting quietly on the rear seat of the car. A feeling of disquiet, which will, over the coming years, grow through anger and despair into a sometimes resigned, sometimes raging malevolence, niggles away at his present tranquility. So far marriage has not turned out to be as satisfactory as he had hoped for. He had eventually chosen a quiet and religious girl, plucked from the east end city slum where her father's early death and mother's poverty had placed her. A girl who had been impressed by the strong bearing of this man, his religious certitudes, and even more so, it has to be said, by his black Austin car. A man some years her senior and old for his years courts a young woman brought up without a father in a large female family, lacking experience, judgment, wise counsel, a young woman whose idea of marriage is taken not from lived experience but from penny novels and the rare trip to the picture house with a girlfriend. A young woman moreover, and this will become all too evident after the children arrive, who has a genetic and emotional heritage which is shaky, where hysteria and 'nerves' cover unnamed and common enough mental illnesses in mother, sister, aunt.⁸

⁸ The harsh socioeconomic circumstances prevailing in impoverished working class homes which females experienced during the first three decades of the twentieth century in Britain are extensively documented in literature, academic texts and film. See Davies (1988), Dayus (1982), Mitchell (1977), Roberts (1971), Sennett and Cobb (1966), Steedman (1986), Willmott and Young (1962) and Woodward (1983) for only a few examples. The mental and emotional, as well as material, stress of living in extreme poverty is now also recognised (see the extensive work of Peter Townsend who pioneered the current debates on the links between poverty and ill health, for example Townsend et al. 1992). In addition to these disadvantages was my mother's early fatherless childhood. She grew up in a large extended family almost wholly female, the men having died early from poverty or industrially-related illnesses like her own father or killed in the First World War. She had very little

Some of this 'flaky-ness' has already begun to emerge, starting after the birth of the eldest child sitting quietly dangling her feet on the edge of the seat behind him. His wife does not seem able to cope with what seems to him the perfectly normal tasks of looking after babies, small children. What other women appear to take in their stride his wife struggles with. She has her first attacks of 'nerves', her 'palpitations', she cries a lot, she is endlessly anxious and uncertain in her mothering. She is depressed of course, but such a diagnosis will take several more decades to emerge as the explanation, far too late by then to save this marriage, these children.⁹

He is out of his depth but still for this moment in the marriage trying to understand, to help, as he can. That is why the eldest daughter is with him now. The birth of the second child, another girl and thus a serious disappointment,¹⁰ which he will not make any attempt to hide in the years to

experience of men and the stern Primitive Methodist culture of her family reinforced her social isolation and inexperience with males. She had no first hand observation of marital relationships and was naïve and unrealistic in her expectations of marriage.

⁹ Much more is known now than in the 1940s about the first crucial months in an infant's life. Concepts such as 'bonding' or 'attachment' and any awareness of 'post natal depression' and its impact on this process were unknown by people of my parents' social class and educational level. The insights of such psychologists as Winnicott (1964) and Bowlby (see Karen 1998, for an excellent account of Bowlby's work) were entirely unavailable to women such as my mother. What she did have available to her was her own experience of being parented (a strict traditional authoritarianism) and a version of child rearing prevalent in the cultural milieu of the time and filtered through the prism of popular women's magazines. This was hugely influenced by such child 'experts' as Truby King (see King 1931). This authoritarian regimentation of child rearing chimed disastrously with the rigid religious mindset of my father and resulted wholly predictably in some of their children's basic needs being unmet by an uncertain, unconfident and depressed woman.

¹⁰ The impact of such overt sexism and openly expressed disappointment as to one's gender is difficult to overestimate. I grew up being told by my father in a myriad of ways that I was second class and penalised because of it; for example my heartfelt wish to be given a 'big' two-wheeled bike such as some friends had provoked the predictable comment from my father that if I had been a boy I would have been given it, but as I was a girl it was wasted on me. Such was the crudeness of my father's sexism that it guaranteed my own and my sister's enthusiastic embrace of feminism in the 1970s. I was well on my way to becoming a feminist from the age of five. Two decades later I didn't require an intellectual critique to understand patriarchy; I still burned with a profound sense of injustice brought about by my father's treatment. My experience of course was

come, has created extra strain at home. It is not the baby that is proving difficult so much as the eldest child's reaction to her arrival and his wife's inability to manage the two of them together. So, he does what he can and on days when he travels across to Manchester he sometimes takes the eldest child to give his wife a break. She is good enough, this eldest daughter, a quiet, watchful little thing, no trouble to him. Why she has taken the second child's arrival so hard is a mystery to him but not one he is inclined to waste any time thinking over. She must learn to get on with it, he won't have a spoiled brat in his house. It does not occur to him, now, or at any time for the rest of his long life – and this man will live to see a century and beyond – that his wife's first attempts at uncertain mothering have made for an insecure and anxious little girl, struggling to find the secure attachment, the longed-for bond.

And what of this child, the first daughter of this mismatched couple? Now a sister, a big sister, she is told, viewing the baby for the first time that awful morning.¹¹ A morning she has not forgotten, nor will she for the rest of her

commonplace historically speaking, but what made my responses and actions different to those oppressed 'sisters' gone before me was growing up in post-war mid-twentieth century England, with a sharp rise in educational opportunities and a corresponding social mobility along with a crucial shift in attitudes for girls like me. See Heron (1985) for a discussion of this.

¹¹ Theorising sistering is tricky. It is not carefully defined in our culture, it is largely a socially invisible tie, it can take a multiplicity of forms, and it has been arguably marginalised in public discourses and public knowledges by the more acceptable emphasis on *family* and *siblings*. Johnson (1986) makes a pertinent point in arguing that power operates to ignore important or relevant issues for subordinated groups in society, and thus their experience is privatised, pushed below the surface. The lack of sistering as an authoritative and crucial familial concept in the public domain makes it difficult to develop a voice, a language, with which women who are or have been sisters, to tell of, to share, to theorise, their experiences. I suggest there are several possible reasons for this. As a sociologist by training I am aware that much of sociology's primary focus historically has been on the big picture of society or societal institutions, or the interrelationships between individuals and society. It has largely left the intimate analysis of interpersonal relationships to the discipline of psychology. And psychology, especially in the works of Alfred Adler, has given more attention to the *sibling* relationship. See Dreikurs (1953) for a comprehensive overview of his work and theories. Dominated by male theorists and their

life. A story will be made of it, and told to her sister's friends within the first hours of acquaintance. Her sister will learn to time it, to see how long it takes for the story to be brought out and told. Told with all the anguish and rage of the two year old she was, the two year old she still is during the telling of this monstrous injustice, this primal wounding. Sent to a neighbour when her mother's labour starts, she takes this in her stride. The neighbour's child is her age and they have already played together. She settles in, and without knowing the reason, she relaxes in this home, where the mother is calm and cheerful, no-nonsense and clear in her handling of the children. The home birth is complicated and the doctor has to be fetched from the pub by the midwife. So the child is put to bed with the neighbour and small friend whom she loves. It is cosy and warm and safe. In the morning she settles in to play once more with the neighbour's child. She has for the moment forgotten about home, being absorbed and happy in her game.

Suddenly her father appears. A hurried conversation turned away from the children takes place and then her father holds out his hand to her. Come on, he says, time to go home. You have a baby sister, come and see her. The little girl looks at her father and frowns. What does he mean? Does she have to

preoccupations, sociology has not much concerned itself with how private relationships between females within an accepted but unexamined area of women's lives might shape those individuals and subsequently the world in which they live out their lives. Feminist sociologists have moved strongly over the last few decades to interrogate and theorise society from a woman's perspective but the area of sistering has gone largely unremarked. I think there is a further reason for this, and that is the gap which exists between an idealisation and politicisation of sisterhood (solidarity, togetherness) and the lived experience of sistering for many women. This lack of congruence makes sistering an uncomfortable research topic – a bit too close to home for some of us, particularly if our sistering relationship, whatever its quality, lies at the centre of a crucial web of intra-familial responsibilities and caring. Despite this lack of sociological interest, sisters (as with brothers) have a shared lifetime history, for many from first to last, which makes it a unique experience amongst other social relationships.

leave her friend, her game, this nice home? She turns away and carries on playing. Her father, more impatient now, it has been a long worrying night after all, repeats his instruction. No, the child says calmly, want to stay here. Don't want to see baby sister. And indeed, why would she? But the father is not in any mind to see the child's point of view. He is tired, he is anxious, he will not be disobeyed by a child of his. Swooping down, he picks her up, and stills her struggles by a hard and prolonged slapping from those massive muscled hands. Beating her all the way home, he carries her into the house and deposits her in the bedroom, by the baby's crib. Shaken, in considerable pain, furious, she stares down at the cause of her grief, the reason for her smarting body, and knows in all her small being that this baby is the cause of her unhappiness and it is here to stay and she is desolate.

Now, today, she sits on the car seat and in her heart knows the truth about her trip through the countryside with her father. It is so her mother can spend the day alone with her little sister. She has been banished, made to go on a car journey when she would much rather be at home with her mother.¹²

¹² Bowlby (1953) is the person largely responsible for the development of 'attachment theory' in the 1950s and 1960s, insisting in the face of much opposition, including from later feminists such as myself (his timing was 'off' is my defence now) that a child's early attachment experiences were key to their emotional health and development. The theory was developed to include concepts such as 'anxious attachment' where the main caregiver is experienced by the infant as unavailable or distant. Such experience will increase the child's needs for attachment and security, manifested for example by 'clinginess'. I suggest here that this was my sister's experience, with an uncertain and depressed mother who often fell back on authoritarian responses to her children's emotional needs which she felt unable to meet. My father's action in taking my sister with him on his work journeys after my birth seems on the face of it to be a practical and helpful response. It could have proved beneficial had my father already established a loving and emotionally close bond with his eldest daughter. This was not the case, him being already a fearful figure to my sister, which increased her emotional dependence on our mother. However, early feelings of abandonment can have lifelong consequences as Miller (1987a) points out. 'In addition to simple denial, we usually find the exhausting struggle to fulfill the old, repressed, and by now often perverted needs with the help of symbols (cults, sexual perversions, groups of all kinds, alcohol or drugs)' (p 13). I found this comment, as I did much of Miller's exemplary text, particularly helpful in understanding my own and my sister's

Today she has to spend the whole day with her father, someone she is already wary of, and with good reason. She has felt his hard hand on more occasions than the birth of her sister. However quiet and good she tries to be she cannot meet her father's unrealistic expectations of a small child. She is already learning the trick of deviousness; the simmering resentment masked by the obedient manner, the innocent face. Faced with righteous certainty regarding behaviour required by her father backed up by God, she is learning already to negotiate her way through the mass of rigid rules, the autocratic law her father lays down, with guile and some astuteness. She has, after all, inherited her father's intelligence. So she does not give voice to her feelings of sadness and rejection and fury which grip her as she sits in the car. No, outwardly she appears unconcerned today, swinging her legs, looking at the passing scenery, with one eye always on her father, monitoring, checking, keeping a safe distance.¹³

This will change in a very short time now.

The car approaches the reservoir, negotiates a sheep intent on a juicy tuft, draws smoothly to a halt by the side of the dam. These are the very last few moments before her life, and indeed, that of her sister's, changes for ever. What happens next is a secret kept for the next thirty six years, only to be wrenched out of her in a different crisis of pain and desolation.

- Daft sheep, says her father, never any sense.

childhood experiences (I would agree with the quote from Sara Paretsky on the front cover of my copy, 'Alice Miller changed the way I think about my life').

¹³ The emotional consequences attendant on a child's forced adaptation to parental needs lead to the construction of a 'false self'. The child develops in such a way that s/he reveals only what is expected, and does this so successfully that one would be hard pressed to guess at what else lies behind this false self. See Winnicott (1965) for an explanation of this concept.

And then,

- We'll stop here shall we and have our hot drink, mmm?

Her father climbs out and starts the ritual of hauling out the primus stove from the boot, getting it lit, a saucepan of milk balancing precariously on the flame. 'Camp' coffee in his mug, hot milk for the child.

There are a few yards of moorland separating the car from the dam and the little girl shivers briefly. She does not like the reservoir, but knows better than to say so. It is her father's favourite stopping place on this journey. The water is always darkest dark, forever still, and stretches further than she can see between the hills. There is a brooding quality about this water. No boat rocks on it, no bird skims its surface. Below, deep, deepest down, in the bottomless depth lies a village she has been told, houses and a church, where people, children, once lived. She shivers again, the curse of an imaginative child, and turning away finds her father back in the driving seat holding out her beaker.

Sipping their drinks father and child sit in quietness, the child calmed by the comfort of the warming milk, the father appreciative of the glorious scenery stretching for miles around him. He scans the landscape, an observant man, looking for the wildlife, the birds, and, bringing his gaze closer to the dam, he thinks he sees something move, low down in the heather, near the water line. A sheep lying down, in trouble? A grouse keeping low? No, a farm dog perhaps, trapped, broken a leg? His attention

focused now, raising slightly in his seat to get a clearer view, he stares intently and then, no, it can't be..., surely not? Not here of all places? Then his body stiffens, and the neck muscles are taut with barely suppressed anger. The child senses the change, looks first inquiringly and then fearfully at her father. Something is wrong. What is it? Has she done something bad? No, her father's gaze is trained on something outside the car, not on her.

Suddenly her father's body snaps up. He is shouting instructions at her.

- Get down, get down, get between the seats. Stay there. Don't move. Stay there until I tell you to move. And don't look. Do you hear me? Don't look. I'll give you a hiding if you look through the window. Get down now.

And with that he is gone, and the child is crouching down in the gap between the seats. All her life she will remember the particular smell of the carpet pressing against her nose. What has happened? Where has her father gone? When will he come back? A lifetime passes and still she stays crouching as she has been told to do. But anxiety as to where her father has gone, and an irrepressible compulsion to look, just a peep, brings her head up, inching an eye above the window sill.

An incomprehensible scene plays out before her horrified stare. Her father is grappling with a man, fighting, punching his weight, the other man is flailing. A few feet away a woman is starting to scream, no, no, stop it, stop it, oh...Her father is easily the bigger, the stronger of the two. She sees her father's raised fist, the smash down, the crumpling shape. Now she sees her

father kicking the inert body. On and on, oh, she can't bear it, ducks down, trembling with the horror of it, comes up again to see a changed scene. The woman is gone, nowhere to be seen and her father is now dragging a large dark shape to the edge of the reservoir. She is paralysed. She sees the dark water, she feels it closing over her head, she is choking, suffocating, drowning...¹⁴

She comes round lying on the bottom of the car floor and then her father is there again, slumped in the driving seat. He is breathing raggedly, his shoulders heave, sweat pours down his grim face. Slowly his body quietens and he straightens himself, pulls his body up into a driving position and takes hold of the wheel.

It is this moment now which separates the child's life into before and after.

For now she sees her father's massive, knuckled hands gripping the wheel. They are covered in blood. She cannot take her eyes away, she is transfixed with terror. The fight, the lifeless body, the black water....she opens her mouth but no sound comes. She is left possessed by a terrible knowledge. She has seen her father kill a man. The idea, once thought, takes root, becomes

¹⁴ My sister has a phobic fear of deep and dark expanses of water. I grew up knowing this and never once thought to question where it had come from until the knowledge was forced on me many years later. What I did know was that my sister would on no account go anywhere near lakes or dams and especially the local reservoir. In local car journeys together as adults I accepted that we would have to make a detour to avoid the dam. She consistently refused to holiday anywhere like the Lake District because she couldn't predict when she might come across a lake. On one occasion we holidayed together staying in a small seaside village. We set off on the first evening to find the pub and took a wrong turning which brought us out at the harbour. It was a dark night with some moonlight shining on the dark water. My sister's reaction was extremely distressing. She froze to the spot and then collapsed screaming in terror. I managed to pull her around the corner away from the sight, and settled in the pub, asked her for the first time what it was all about. She refused to discuss it.

over the years of her life an unquestioned, unshakeable, unchallenged absolute. And she feels with grim intuition that she will always carry this dreadful secret. Aged just four this dread knowledge enters her soul forever more. She will live her life burdened by this awful act. Yes, here is her father, telling her now that she must not talk about this, ever, to no-one, no-one at all.¹⁵

And as the car pulls away driven by a man armoured, invincible, in his righteousness, and she sits shaking uncontrollably on her seat, it comes to her with an overwhelming force, a rage, that if she had been at home this day, then she would have known nothing of this. A traumatized child, unable to cope with consequences following grievous parental dereliction, must somehow deflect this threat to her existence somewhere else. Why isn't she at home where she has wanted to be all along? Staring at her father's bloody hands on the wheel, she thinks of her little sister. That is why she is shaking, shaking, as the car accelerates away and the dark stillness of the dam causes her to turn away with a barely stifled scream.

And so this day the die is cast.

Between daughter and father certainly, but also between two sisters. What has up to this moment been an unfortunate introduction between the sisters, a natural sibling rivalry intensified by uncertain mothering, becomes transformed into something else.

¹⁵ How my father enforced this silence is open to speculation. My sister threw out various hints to me over the years but never confirmed my private thoughts on this matter. However it was maintained it was done at devastating emotional cost to my sister. Her trauma was unknown to anyone other than my father who only wished to repress and deny it for his own sake.

One sister burdened now with a terrible secret, an unspeakable terror she takes with her through every lifelong day, and one sister burdened with being the cause of it.

Secrets carry with them their own retribution. Each sister will learn this, in their separate ways, over their lifetimes.¹⁶

But secrets, if ever spilt, can also bring about transformations.¹⁷

¹⁶ Silence as well as language plays its part in the construction – and dissolution – of sister relationships. See Rogers (2006).

¹⁷ As Miller (1987a) says '...every childhood's traumatic experiences remain hidden and locked in darkness, and the key to our understanding of the life that follows is hidden away with them' (p 5). This key was given to me three and a half decades later at the time of another traumatic incident (described in Chapter Three) which involved the three of us, myself, my sister and our father, but I was slow to understand what had been placed in my hands at the time. It was only after another thirteen years and a last and final traumatic incident between myself and my sister (described in Chapter Five) that I recognised what had lain within my grasp for a long while. This time I was able to turn the key. So I view the narrative which follows as evidence of some transformative learning on my part and also of my changing subjectivity. It is my intention that '[it] brings together through language, the two discordant epistemologies; experience, the material and the emotional on the one hand; subjectivity, discourse and narrative on the other' (Mauthner 2002, p 191). But it is something more fundamental to me as well. It feels like one woman's transcendence, a small quiet victory over the mighty weight of patriarchy. And that is because one reading of this narrative is that my father shaped my sister's and my own stories; more, he shaped our relationship from start to finish. Or at least that would be true if I had not embarked on a search for my sister, for my sistering relationship, a search told here. As Foucault's work demonstrates (see Foucault 1980) there is a vital connection between knowledge and power. And in the process what occurred to me was that the unfolding story was not just about my sister and myself but part of a wider narrative, of families, female relationships and a particular familial connection named 'sisters'. So yes, it is a personal story, a private relationship buried deep within the closed circle of our family group. But it is also a story of two females situated in a particular society at a specific period in history, one which we share with innumerable women who are also sisters. I got excited when this dawned on me. From out of the struggle and pain of my own sistering story I could perhaps speak to other women, help to make some connections, provide a narrative which could stimulate reflection and discussion and argument and challenge. So what I want to do here is to make the vital connection between a private issue and public concerns, between individual agency and social institutions, between biography and history, between the story of two sisters and the nexus of patriarchy, social class and gendered subjectivities which enmeshed us. I hope without any hubris to demonstrate in some small way a 'sociological imagination' (Mills 1959) through the performance of an fictionalised autoethnographic narrative inquiry.

Chapter 1 On-Going Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss and Chronic Contradictions¹⁸

¹⁸ The choice of the story of my mother's final illness as the starting point to my inquiry is not accidental. My first introduction to narrative research brought me into contact with Carolyn Ellis's text (Ellis 1995) and I hope she will forgive me for my take on her title. I was very dubious at the time about all this storytelling masquerading as 'research'. What was wrong with good qualitative sociological research? Was telling your own story really on? What about Objectivity, Facts, Truth? Harrumphing through the Narrative Research module at the University of Bristol I found myself challenged by one of the tutors. 'Read this' she said thrusting Ellis's book into my reluctant hand, 'and then come back and tell me why it isn't 'proper' research'. I read Ellis's book in one sitting, un-put-down-able, mesmerising, gut-wrenching, insightful, reflexive. Part of its impact was the parallel between her story and the loss of my mother, a loss I had been at pains to leave well alone over the years. I confessed the error of my prejudices to my tutor. Heartlessly she said 'now go and write your own account'. So I made a start with the paper I had to submit by writing an autoethnographic account of one day in the life of my mother's illness. And of course that did it. I began to 'get it', the whole narrative/autoethnographic/performance/writing as inquiry 'bag'. What a liberation. What a joy. What a challenge. Deciding to research sistering presented an opportunity to explore this methodological approach. As Mauthner (2002) so aptly puts it 'exploring a social tie invisible except to those involved in it presents several challenges. One task is to find a suitable language for describing this private and hidden world' (p 6). She goes on to say 'one way to describe a hidden culture is through women's own words' (p 9). I think I have found that 'suitable language' within an autoethnographic narrative inquiry. I share an identical goal with Mauthner in relation to my theoretical project, that is, of constructing an analysis which will interrogate how subjectivity is both affected by, and affects in turn, the sistering relationship. I too look at this by writing about care giving and power relations between sisters (see Mauthner 2002). But I have chosen to experiment with a different methodology from the one she applies in her seminal research into this little known area of social life. My methodology of autoethnographic narrative

The ringing phone leaks into her dream, and drags her through a lifetime of resistance, into wakefulness. She is still caught in its web, details fading even as she tries to grasp – no, it *is* the phone. What on earth? It is dark behind the curtains, the clock shows five to five. A split second of violent awakening, then she is up and out of bed in one movement and running down the stairs. The children are staying at their father's, and instantly she knows something awful has happened. Doug is ringing to tell her of some crisis, some catastrophe, it has to be this early in the morning. Icy fear washes over her, oh my god, oh my...Yes, hello?

But it is not Doug's voice and momentarily thrown she struggles to hear the words, the speaker. Who is this? Elderly, shaky. The voice transmutes into a familiar tone and it is her father speaking, telling her – what is he telling

inquiry utilises a feminist theory which is rooted in a belief that knowledge derived from women's experience is as equally valid as that derived from expertise. I am particularly concerned to present a body of knowledge which is accessible to other women who are, or have an interest in, sisters and sistering. This is why I choose to present my narrative intact with the theorising and analysis put into footnotes. I have some discomfort with this strategy and have reservations about it. I am not convinced it 'works', at least as far as the requirements of an academic dissertation is concerned. However I chose not to truncate the narrative by adding in a 'theory' chapter at the end which I considered. This, then, is one story (and mine only) of how two women 'did' sistering, and by extension the extent to which women as sisters are able to rewrite their sistering script. A final note. Writing about family members in their absence and at some depth is a risky undertaking. The risk is magnified when the narrative discloses intimate and private behaviour and actions which may invite judgement. Some may argue that such a narrative dictates it be left well alone. I have given much thought to these issues and ethical considerations have sat on my shoulder throughout the writing of this dissertation. Ultimately I argue that such a narrative is legitimated by the integrity I have striven to bring to it and by its usefulness to others. To paraphrase my own words, secrets when spilt can bring about transformations. However I have gone to some length to fictionalise the narrative as a protective device for family members. Pseudonyms have been given to all the characters, place names have been changed or obscured where it was deemed necessary and some details or events have been altered or invented. This narrative makes no claim to give the 'Truth' about the characters or events herein described. Rather it seeks to reveal certain truths which if I have done my work properly will find resonances with others' truths. In this way it is my hope that we can build together a body of research about the social experience of being sisters.

her? Something about her mother. Then she connects, now she is listening intently, yes, she says, yes, she will come, she is coming now, hang on, don't worry, I'll be there in a few minutes. Just hang on.

Three minutes later she is out of the house and feet flying down the hill to Doug's house. Bang on the door, ring the bell, thump the letter box, come on come on, and then he's there, bewildered, grumpy, what's up? She explains, staccato, she needs the car, the buses are not running yet, yes she knows it puts him out, but please?

She accelerates away up the hill, cuts round the park, floors it on the brief stretch of dual carriageway, twists through the council estate, throttles round the corner shops, and she's there. Fourteen minutes. She hasn't had time to think, just to act. Opening the car door she knows that she has no idea what is waiting for her on the other side of the peeling, faded green door, just something bad. Something sufficiently awful for her father to ring her, say he needs her help, he doesn't know what to do, please come, it's your mother. The wife he hasn't talked to for over two years. The wife he has lived with in the same house and kept silence with, the wife driven to take out an injunction against him, to what purpose they are all unclear. This lifelong partner who has been alternately bullied and left bereft, now has his full attention. So yes, it is going to be bad, whatever it is.

His face tells her the worst. Never before has she seen her father look like this.

- I found her on the floor, he says.

- The noise she was making woke me. I came down and she was here, in the kitchen. She must have been trying to make a cup of tea, but the tea was all in the sink and in the kettle, and she must have tried to dress herself, because, because.....

And he breaks down, struggles for a breath, wipes his eyes. She regards him, wondering, assessing.

- Where is she now Dad? she asks, and her father points to the ceiling.

- I managed to get her up to her bed, she's sleeping. I didn't know what to do so I rang you.

- You did the right thing Dad, she says. You've rung Jean?

It was more a statement of fact than a question.

A slight pause.

- No. I just rang you. I thought you'd cope better, know what to do, like.

It is the first intimation. Like the slight tremor which precedes a larger earthquake, she senses, even as she passes out of the kitchen to climb the stairs, that there is something momentous in this bald statement of her father's, a recognition of some knowledge that her father has of her and her

older sister, which she herself does not yet have and has not recognized up until this moment.

She looks down on the inert form that is her mother and her heart contracts in profound and grievous pain. She knows at once, and without any hope. Her mother lies trussed in a bizarre collection of underclothes put over outer clothes, ancient pink corset on top of slacks. Even as she registers her mother's blue-grey pallor, her shallow breathing, her comatose state, Susan wants more than anything to sort Rose out. Get those clothes off her, put her in her nightie, make her comfortable. Instead she switches into coping. First things first.

- Go and phone the doctor Dad, she says, as he hovers at her shoulder.
- She doesn't look good, does she? he whispers, choking again. And then,
- But isn't it too early to call him?

Ever deferential to his betters even when in extremis.

- It's alright Dad, I'll ring, she says. Just stay with Mum and see if you can loosen her clothes a bit, make her more comfy.

Her father looks uncertainly at her, and she knows as she picks up the phone that he will have done nothing when she gets back. She makes the call with all the authority she can produce and gets a result. He will come at once.

Good. She has been unhappy about her mother's medical care over the last few years and would not have been surprised to find herself having to push hard for a home visit. Going into the sitting room where her mother keeps her needlework box she finds the dressmaking scissors and goes back upstairs. Her mother lies stricken and untouched.

- 'The doctor's coming now, Dad. Why don't you go and clean up a bit in the kitchen and I'll see to Mum.

Susan turns to her mother and studies the complicated straitjacket she has managed to contrive with the corset. Carefully she bends and snips, snips, until her mother is freed from the pink elastic. There, that's better.

Susan stares at the pink shreds in her hands and thinks about corsets. All women of her mother's age wore them, wouldn't dream of abandoning them. All her life she has seen these corsets, both on and off her mother's body. Huge, boned, with ferocious metal hooks, agonizingly uncomfortable and cherished by her mother who didn't 'feel right' without them. Susan's generation has renounced them without a backward glance. She can't think of any of her feminist sisters relinquishing their bras, contrary to public myth, but she knows that most of them, including her, consigned their girdles to the dustbin with glee, along with the stiletto heels.¹⁹

¹⁹ For a small selection of arguments relating to the harmful gender stereotyping of traditional 'feminine' clothing and practices put forward by feminists in the 1970s see Allen et al. (1974), Birmingham Women's Studies Group (1978), Friedan (1965), Greer (1971), Lipshitz (1978), Oakley (1972), Sharpe (1976) and Wandor (1970).

And this makes her think about restrictions and women's lives and her mother's life and so called respectability and the awful hackneyed symbolism of this pink elastic which she holds in her hands. And she realizes the significance of what she has done; she has freed her mother's body just at the point her mother loses it, and suddenly here are the first tears, dripping down onto the frayed shreds of a long-ago frayed life.

Back downstairs she puts the remnants in the bin. Her father looks askance.

- Your mother won't like that, he says, ruining a decent pair of corsets.

She gives him a look and he turns away. Nothing more needs to be said.

A little later and her sister has arrived. Between them they make arrangements. Jean will stay for the doctor's visit and Susan will go to work, a new job started only this week, with the first staff meeting this morning. Once that's over, she'll come back and then Jean will go into work late. The beginning of a pattern, of care, of organization, of juggling, starts here. Yes, she reassures her father who seems concerned about her going, she will come back as soon as she can, but Jean is here, so he'll be alright.

Somehow she gets herself to work, two bus journeys and a long-ish walk. It's important, her first introduction to the divisional staff, and she cannot concentrate on any of it. All she sees is her mother's face, the pallor, the marks of serious collapse written on it. Is the doctor there now? How will Jean deal with him? What will be the diagnosis? Her mother has been unwell with pernicious anaemia for some months now but that all seemed to

be under control. Of course, her mother has got much more forgetful and vague lately, sufficiently bad to concern them both. Jean had gone with Rose to the GP for a check up but he'd reassured, just the pernicious anaemia, makes them very forgetful, and well, your mother's not getting any younger is she... ? She's still in her sixties, for god's sake, Susan thought, suddenly angry, staring out of the begrimed bus window. Why didn't we challenge that? In fact, why didn't Jean challenge that at the time?²⁰

She recalls her father's comment now, and puzzles over it. She realizes that it has shaken her in passing, shaken something held onto unquestioningly for her whole life. Jean is her big sister, automatically given preference, deferred to, her authority unchallenged. She's very surprised that he chose to ring her rather than Jean, it somehow breaks an unspoken rule. It makes her feel freighted with responsibility, to be seen as the 'lead' daughter by her father when push comes to shove. Particularly as she has been the one to challenge, to fight him, to defy, disobey, to oppose him as implacably as he has her. Their relationship has been a rollercoaster, whereas Jean has been the much more dutiful daughter. She has a sudden insight as the bus grinds up a hill and lurches round the bend. She supposes that Jean must have been burdened with the 'lead' daughter role all through her life. Did she feel the same weight of responsibility that has suddenly come to her? That's been

²⁰ I have a view that unconscious gender stereotyping of women patients in general by the medical profession and of older women patients in particular was widespread and still largely unchallenged in the 1980s. See Phillips and Rakusen (1978) for a praiseworthy attempt to encourage women to challenge these attitudes by informing ourselves. Women GPs were still in a minority in many GP practices and it was only too easy for a male GP with traditional gender assumptions to view, and prescribe, for an older woman with known mental health problems, in a standard way. In my mother's (and no doubt many other women's) case, I argue that fixed assumptions prevented the GP from looking past her mental health history to see the clear evidence which presented itself of an illness which was organic in nature. I would assert that this is an example of patriarchal practice as well as an act of agency on the part of the doctor.

heavy, if so.²¹ Susan has never had these thoughts before, and maybe she senses something else, another insight as yet unformed but felt, as the bus pulls away from another stop; about parents getting old, about their dying and how such parlous events can produce the shifting of tectonic plates between family members, cataclysmic movement which changes the family terrain for ever.²²

This is in the future, but for now Susan stays puzzling over her new realization about her big sister. She cannot remember a time when Jean was not there in authority over her,²³ and surely - now she comes to think about it - unusual in a child just two years older than the younger one? But there it is, it has always been that way, her mother somehow more in the background, loving but vague, fuzzy really, and Jean deputed to look after her, see to her, made responsible for her. Of course older girls in those days were expected to nursemaid the younger ones, but the degree to which her sister did it was unusual, she could see that. A dutiful child, she took it very seriously too.

²¹ 'Minimothering' is almost always forced onto an older sister and not chosen freely by her. Mauthner refers to this sisterly practice as a '*positioned discourse*', where the roles are fixed and commonly non-negotiable, at least in childhood. It is seen as a discourse because there is a clear power relationship at the heart of these positions, with power given to the 'big' sister over the 'little' sister. As well 'discourse' is also used here to signify a specific way of thinking about or representing something which we, the subject, utilise often unconsciously. This goes some way to explaining why we come to be positioned in the way we are, that is, in damaged discourses. For a useful discussion of discourses of femininity see Mauthner (2002). 'Caring' for someone can be as much a site of power as of 'giving'. This of course is what may lead to confusion and ambivalence within a relationship for both parties. It is also I would argue why the minimother/looked after sistering relationship is particularly powerful in shaping individual subjectivities.

²² It is not a coincidence that it is an external crisis such as a family member's illness and death which stimulates the process of changing subjectivities for sisters. This was certainly true for me. It was our mother's collapse and final illness which brought about an awareness of a shift in our sisterly roles, our '*positioned discourse*', which had remained unexamined by me up until this point.

²³ For the many women who have or have had sisters I think it is impossible for us to provide ourselves with a life narrative which is not also about our sister's life as well.

Look at the way she taught her to read, just three years old. Off Jean had gone to school, aged five and suddenly very grown up, moving in a mysterious world of 'Miss' and 'tables' and 'Janet and John' books. Susan had longed to follow her, to be initiated into the secrets Jean had hugged to herself.

- You won't understand, you're just a baby.
- Go away, I don't want you looking, this is *my* school work.
- Wouldn't you like to know about it? Well, you can't because I'm not telling you, little crybaby.
- Go away, go away, *go away* pest.....

Susan had felt confused, bewildered, but already accepting of the rejection. She had already been put into Jean's company and care by this time, instructed by their mother to do what Jean said, to stay close to her, to follow her when they went out to play in the street with the other little girls. She was becoming habituated to 'tagging along', tolerated by the girls' gang, all her sister's age and a long way ahead of her for the moment in their games, their bigness, their language. The identification between Jean and Susan as sisters was reinforced by being dressed identically, Susan just a scaled - down version of Jean. The blurring of separate identities had begun, the possibilities of developing an autonomous sense of self already become

constrained, distorted by the unnatural closeness which their mother insisted upon.²⁴

Jean's refusal to share her new world was inexplicable to Susan and in her bid to include herself in it, she took to finding a book left somewhere in the house, and sitting down on 'their' stool, she pretended she could read too. Holding the book upside down as often as not, she would murmur away to herself, a singsong voice copying unconsciously the cadences of story telling. She was capable of doing this for hours at a time, it was soothing, she looked at the pictures and made up stories about them, and most importantly, she pretended she was 'at school' with her sister and the other little girls from the street.

Then came the day when Jean suddenly changed tactics, and for which Susan had good reason to thank her for, then and much later on in adult life. Bouncing into the kitchen after her day at school, Jean saw Susan with book in hand in her usual place on the stool. Whether it was a sudden understanding that her little sister would inevitably follow her to school some day, or whether it was the first early intimation of the desire to impart learning which would lead her to a teaching career, who knows?

Grabbing the book Jean made the decision which went down in family legend.

²⁴ Banks and Kahn (1982) describe the 'fusing' of siblings by parents who treat, or attempt to treat, their children as 'the same' rather than giving each child a clear role, space, identity. They suggest that siblings can then 'fuse' in each other's minds, with resultant impairment to reality testing and a blurring between what is self and not-self. This leads to identity confusion and often creates greater rather than less antagonism between siblings. On the other hand difference between siblings helps make the sibling bond work which encourages feelings of 'uniqueness' and security.

- You have to learn to read *properly* Susan. I'm not being shown up at school by *my* sister who can't read *properly*.

And so the lessons started.

Every day after school Susan had her sister's 'Janet and John' book thrust into her hand and copying the teacher at school faultlessly, Jean taught her to read. Susan of course was unaware of the subtext behind Jean's decision to teach her to read; all she knew was that she was being initiated every day into the inexpressible joy of being able to turn the black squiggles on the page into words and stories. She made a willing and fast learner. By the time she was five and starting school she was a confident and fluent reader, although this did create a crisis for Susan in the early days at school which left its mark.

It is afternoon I think because of my memory of the light in the classroom, and my favourite activity has started. Reading. I love reading. I can do it, fast, easily, gulping down the words, racing through the pages to find out what happens next. I am transported to a magical world because I have already mastered the code, possess the key which unlocks the door to endless treasures. I can't remember how I got to do this, seemingly it just happened. I am enthralled by this new skill I have acquired. I read voraciously, working my way systematically around the room from the first to the last reading book.

Except I don't do this by the prescribed method. As usual my nervousness and chronic high state of anxiety has rendered me deaf to the simple instructions which are to read one book at a time starting with the one closest to the classroom door and then to read it to Miss Burnham to make sure we are ready to move on to the next book. I do what I always do; unsure as to what the correct procedure is and having already learnt that to ask often invites an unpleasant response from an angry grown up, I keep quiet and watch the other children carefully. I see them moving from book to book and decide that what I have to do is read all the books before I go to read to the teacher.

And so I read every one of the books in the classroom at top speed. Clutching the most advanced book, just read in one gulp, I go to the teacher's desk and ask her to hear me read. 'Oh no dear' she says, 'You won't be anywhere near that book. You can't read that one. Go and fetch me one by the door.'

I am confused. What does she mean? Timidly I manage to reply. 'I can read this book. I've just read it now.' 'No, no' she says, and, 'Yes, I can' I say, now sufficiently indignant to stand my ground. She looks at me questioningly, decides to humour this stubborn five year old, and opens the book. I fly through the pages. I make no slip, no hesitation, no mistake. I read fluently, with expression, with pace, with confidence. It is easy.

I finish the last page and look up at Miss Burnham, pleased to have shown her I could do it. She is looking down at me with an odd expression on her face I can't work out. She shoots to her feet abruptly and telling me to wait by her desk goes out of the classroom.

I am disconcerted; worse, I am convinced I must have done something wrong to provoke such a reaction. Already I have learned that most of the time I get things wrong, that I am a naughty child and will need punishment. I have clearly been naughty and as usual haven't any idea as to why I have offended. I feel the tears, never far away, threaten to rise up. The children in the classroom all stare at me solemnly. I want the earth to open up under my feet. I fight desperately to keep back my tears of fear and helplessness.

Miss Burnham returns. 'Susan' she says, 'I have just had a word with Miss Williams the Headmistress. She wants you to go and read to her. Off you go, take your book with you, last door at the end of the corridor.'

I stand rooted to the spot. This is worse than ever. Why am I being sent to the Headmistress if not for punishment? I have done something seriously wrong, so bad it is only punishable by Being Sent To The Headmistress. The tears now cannot be held

back any longer and to my misery drip down my face in front of the staring children, the puzzled teacher.

'Go on, Susan,' she says kindly, giving me a gentle push towards the door, 'it's alright, really. Miss Williams just wants to hear you read like you have just read to me.' This fails to reassure me. Reading the book to Miss Burnham has been a big mistake, I can see that now. But I realise I have to go. I walk slowly to the door, and, now trembling in terror, take tiny steps down the corridor. Perhaps if I walk as slowly as I can I will be saved. I have used this strategy before in attempts to win time and change my ordained date with necessary chastisement. Teeny, tiny steps, the heel of one shoe banging against the toe of the other, I slowly work my way to the Head's office. To disobey outright - to do a bunk for instance - is unthinkable to a child reared on Old Testament damnation of childhood disobedience. But I am learning subversive gestures of resistance early in life, fuelled by a growing dreadful knowledge of the savagery of retribution meted out to sinners, of which I am undisputedly one. It is a long corridor to a five year old but even so I arrive eventually and find the door open.

'Ah, there you are Susan. Come on in dear, come along', and the tone of a warm voice, a friendly smile on a kind face and I feel my tears drying up. 'Come and stand by me and read me your

book. Miss Burnham has told me how well you read it.' A clue, the first one, that perhaps I have not transgressed against an unknown by-me sin, but done something well instead. A novel feeling. I cheer up and open my book. I would much rather be given the next one to read, but if I have to read this one again, that's OK. I perform the task again.

Miss Williams puts her arm round me while I read and I immediately fall in love with her, a child unused to casual kindness. 'Well done,' she says, 'splendid. I think you could read some more to me, don't you?' I nod enthusiastically, ready to read until my tongue frays if need be for this lovely lady. I read on steadily through all the books and pages she puts in front of me.

'Well, that's absolutely splendid Susan. You're a very good little reader indeed. Now you must go back to your classroom.' And so I return, skipping along the corridor I previously trembled my way down so many days ago. Some time later Miss Williams pops into our classroom and has a word with Miss Burnham. I look longingly at her. Will she notice me, give me a special smile? At home time Miss Burnham gives me a letter to take home to my mother.²⁵

²⁵ The letter informed my parents that I had been given a battery of reading tests which had established that I had the reading ability of a child of nine years.

*'What's this?' says my mother, voice already rising in alarm.
'What have you been up to? Have you been naughty at school?' I
read all the signs instantly, flood with all the usual feelings of
terror, confusion, helplessness in the face of my mother's panic
responses, all the good feelings from being 'a good little reader'
wiped out, I burst into tears and await my fate.*

By the time Susan arrived at her Infant School Jean had moved up to the Juniors, and for the first time Susan wonders if this was viewed by Jean as stroke of good luck. Maybe she had been dreading her little sister starting school. Jean, like her, had loved school from the start and it had freed her from the constant duty of sisterly supervision her mother insisted on. Away too from a mother who, in her misery and confusion and mental ill-health, had already begun using this small child inappropriately as a confidante in the matter of her unhappy marriage. Jean had let this slip some years earlier and Susan had been shocked. 'Let slip' didn't really describe how Jean had said it either. Maybe they had been having a disagreement about something or other and, as usual, Jean had made sure of winning the argument by bringing in some extraneous point which Susan couldn't challenge.

- You didn't know the half of it, she remembers Jean hissing at her. All the times I had to sit and listen to Mum going on about how awful it was with Dad, and what was I suppose to do? I was a kid for god's sake. All the stuff she told me about them – uggh. You don't realize just how much I protected you from all that crap, how much I had to cope with...

So Jean had been doubly burdened by her roles of confidante and caretaker.²⁶

A much put-upon little girl when you thought about it; no wonder she came into her own at school. Already the leader of the girls' gang on the street, the role must have transferred readily into the school playground. She was popular, clever, good at creating imaginary games, dishing out the roles for other girls to follow, a talent for organization and control already honed on her little sister, Susan thought wryly. Susan remembers Jean swooping round the playground with her gabardine flying out behind her, no doubt working steadily through lessons with quiet interest and ability, liked by friends, approved by teachers. School was best. Later on Susan knew that this would widen into a belief for Jean that anywhere other than home was best. And now the detested little sister was coming to school, albeit in a separate part of the building, divided by big glass doors at the end of the main corridor, and Jean did have a whole new playground to explore...

"I stand uncertainly on the edge of the playground, as near as I dare to the teacher on playground duty. If I go too close she will

²⁶ Given the double burden placed upon my sister as both my carer and our mother's emotional carer also, it is unsurprising that she resorted to the strategy of distancing as she got older.

²⁷ I give this story as an example, from countless others, of my sister's anger and hostility towards me. Careful to express it away from adult gaze such refinements of emotional abuse like this continued throughout my childhood. I am suggesting that such behaviour went a long way beyond 'normal' sibling bickering and rivalry, and was evidence of early emotional damage suffered by my sister, and by extension, myself. Recent research in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, psychoanalysis and biochemistry come together to provide us with some fresh insights into how infants become fully human and learn to relate emotionally to others. See Broks (2003), Damasio (1995), Gerhardt (2004; 2010). It would seem that the physical development of the brain in infants can be affected by emotional experiences. Gerhardt (2010) says 'We are beginning to recognise that more challenging early experiences leave scars, not only in the mind, but also in the brain itself' (p 81). In particular research shows the amygdala is vulnerable during early infancy, the part of the brain which builds up emotional meanings. Similarly the development of the orbitofrontal cortex can also be affected by insecure attachment on the part of the infant. A variety of personality disorders and anti-social behaviours are strongly associated with impaired orbitofrontal cortex development. See Gerhardt (2010).

swoop on me, and giving me a gentle shove, propel me into the mêlée with the words 'Go and find some friends to play with. Off you go dear.' If I stand too far away then I will fall outside the implied protection her presence gives me from other, rougher, bigger children. And so I hover nervously, calibrating the dimensions of my safety zone, hopping from leg to leg, watching my shoe scuffling the gravel, looking up at the sky with pretended intensity when the tears, never far away, threaten to spill over. I feel lonely but relatively safe.

I did have a friend when I first started school. Catherine Jenkins. She lived round the corner at the bottom of the hill our road runs down. She was smaller than me with a mass of blond, curly hair, which immediately enchanted me. On my first morning starting school Catherine and her mother were passing our gate as my sister and I reached it. Her mother, spotting another reception age child, cheerfully scooped us up without breaking her stride, and I found myself introduced to Catherine, my first and last friend in Primary School. She called for me each morning on her way up our road to school and I went happily into the playground with her, played chasing and running games, shared my skipping rope with her, learned some new skipping rhymes. But then she didn't come any more. One

day she didn't turn up at the back door and I walked to school on my own.

I wasn't really on my own because my big sister was under permanent standing orders from our mother to look after me. My sister always delivered - grimly - to the letter, if not the spirit, of our mother's law. Thus I was instructed to walk some paces behind her. 'Don't walk with me' she would hiss, 'who wants to be seen with a scared-y, cry-baby little sister like you?' She would stalk ahead, whipping round every few steps. 'I've told you, mardybum, you're too near. Further back, further back!' I would try to judge and then keep the required distance between us, maintain the same pace. There would be other children often sharing our walk to school. Carol Hitchins and Pat Bell both lived a few houses away on our road and both, bad luck for me, were the same age as my sister and in the same class as her at school. Such was the force of my sister's personality and her leadership qualities even then emerging that the other two children went along with her tactics, more or less. Occasionally one of them, usually Pat, would look backwards and say 'Oh, poor little Susan.' But both of them knew better than to challenge Jean. She was the undisputed leader of the gang. They too were frightened of her, admiring but also in awe when confronted by her.

Hard for a five year old to keep up with a leggy seven year old flying along, and there were variations on this exercise in control and revenge. A sudden slowing down and whipping round, even the odd abrupt full stop when I would almost cannon into her. She would give me a flying shove if there was no-one else around, or a vicious nip if the path was busy with other schoolchildren.²⁸

I didn't challenge any of this. I somehow knew it was useless. I couldn't get ahead and outrun her, she was bigger and faster than me. And anyway I knew if I succeeded she would invariably tell our mother at home time that I hadn't walked with her and I would be the one to get a slap. But it wasn't just pragmatic fatalism that resigned me to my fate each day. It never occurred to me to complain of my treatment by my sister. I accepted both the treatment and my deservedness of it. I didn't question my place at the bottom of the family pecking order and my sister's effortless superiority over me. I already knew I was placed in thrall to Jean by our mother, and also that I was a naughty, sinful child, who gave endless trouble to everyone else in the family. I had been told this enough times by the age of five to have internalised it thoroughly and to believe it.

²⁸ Miller (1987a) says 'Disregard for those who are smaller and weaker is thus the best defence against a breakthrough of one's own feelings of helplessness: it is an expression of this split-off weakness' (p 83). And a further insight is given by her. 'Disrespect is the weapon of the weak and a defence against one's own despised and unwanted feelings, which could trigger memories of events in one's repressed history' (p 85).

So to school and I am deposited without a backward glance in the Infants' playground and my sister races off with her friends to the Juniors' playground. Whilst ever Catherine was attending the school I had been spared this trial by distanced walking. We two had happily walked behind the 'big girls', absorbed in our own friendship. Now I am defenceless against my sister's inexplicable fury and even more exposed once in the playground without Catherine beside me. This is the first bereavement I experience in my life. I miss her terribly and long for her to be with me. I look out for her for a long, long time, peering down the hill outside our house, imagining I can just see her, blond curls bobbing around her head, turning the corner at the bottom of the road. I am shocked by her desertion, bereft. I cry hopelessly, wretchedly.

I found out many years later that Catherine's parents moved to another, more affluent suburb in the city, which meant a transfer to another school. No-one thought to tell me.

Our school is opposite a small suburban shopping centre, dominated by the unmistakable tiled façade of the Co-op. One morning my mother comes out of the Co-op, and crosses the road to our school - it is morning playtime - to see if she can spot my sister and myself in our separate playgrounds. She observes me taking up my lone stance within the orbit of the playground

teacher and stands watching me. She is worried. I am solitary, I am not mixing with the other children, I am not playing, I look forlorn, anxious, unhappy. By the time we return home our mother has decided on a course of action, significantly one which does not involve her directly in ascertaining the reasons for my playground loner status and acting herself on her child's behalf, but which neatly devolves her responsibility (thus is ever to be the pattern) onto my sister, already a much put-upon eldest child. She decrees that when playtime comes round, morning and afternoon, my sister is to leave her friends in the Juniors playground and stand with me in the Infants playground, to 'keep me company', to 'look after me'. My sister, after initial protest, quietly accepts this sentence handed down from our mother. She rarely openly challenges parental authority, but looks at me with even more deadly hatred than ever. The loathsome little sister now has to be nannied in the playground as well as to and from school. All because this little sister is a creep, a jerk, a cry-baby, who can't find a friend to play with. And who in their right mind would want to play with her? Because of her little sister's total inadequacy in the social skills department she is condemned to missing out on playing with her own friends. That vital few minutes, twice a day, in a child's life, when playground friendships are forged and lost, alliances made, gangs to be led, games to be invented and played out to

exhaustion, all this is now denied her. She is livid. Yet again this little sister is ruining her life. Poor big sister.

But it isn't poor big sister in the Infants playground. There it is vengeful, furious big sister who dutifully troops through every playtime into the Infants' and takes up her stance with me at the edge of the playground. Does she help me to integrate into the other groups of children as a way of getting herself off the hook? No. Whether this never occurs to her as a solution, or whether she is already too locked in to her need to legitimise her own frightening feelings about this detested little sister, she doesn't make any such move.²⁹ Instead she stands by my side and drips deadly venom into my shrinking ears. 'Who would want to play with you?' 'Everyone hates you, that's why you have no friends'. 'Look, they're laughing at you over there, they think you're just as horrible as I do'. 'No-one ever wants to be your friend, you'll never have any friends'. On. and on... and on. I stand by her

²⁹ I am exploring here a psychological perspective which provides a plausible and convincing explanation for my sister's childhood and later adult behaviour towards me. The origins and repertoire of relationships are comprehensively described by Object Relations theories. See Gomez (1997). This perspective points to the development of the human psyche and the use made by the infant of primitive psychological processes to protect itself from the trauma of relations with carers. 'Splitting' and 'Projection' are psychological strategies identified by Object Relations theory as defensive strategies used to avoid emotional pain involving denial, idealisation, denigration, and giving to others the painful parts of oneself that are deemed unacceptable and cannot be comfortably tolerated. Someone else carries them for you instead. The splitting and projection used in that phase of life are shown to play a part in adult relating. Hill (2000) says 'Repressed relationship experiences serve as the basis for transference relationships in later life as well as motivating the maintenance of defence mechanisms such as denial and collusions. The theory suggests the extent of the influence of unconscious processes on adult life. They may be the source of behaviour and emotional responses which are not adaptive' (p 606). Using these insights helps me to construct a connection between my sister's damning judgement of my friendship skills in the playground right through the intervening decades to the night in France described in Chapter Five when she says much the same to my friend Alex.

side, crying quietly, in loneliness, unloved, defeated, miserable. 'Oh, now look, see who's crying again. What a cry baby. Cry baby!'

Despite the predictability of my sister's behaviour towards me in the playground I am more relieved than scared to see her appear each day. I know that whilst she blasts away at me for the duration she will also see off any child that threatens me with roughness or rudeness. I accept that she hates me but that she also sees me as an extension of herself and her own status in the complex social strata of the playground. I am after all her little sister, which means that she can dish out the rough treatment with impunity to me but others shouldn't think they can. She is both my tormenter and protector. I both want her to be there and dread it simultaneously. She makes her antipathy to me absolutely plain but she always defends me if deemed necessary. A complex relationship is underway, characterised by a high degree of ambivalence and mistrust and, ultimately, fatal confusion.³⁰

³⁰ See Banks and Kahn (1982) for an extensive discussion in relation to the role of caretaker given to an older child. In essence, the desire to keep one's parents emotionally healthy results in the caretaker child serving the parent's needs. With the desire to protect the parent comes the task of always being on duty. Behaviour of such children is often worried, anxious, driven, for if their caretaking fails, the family might collapse. Crucially this raises the question of the quality of the parental marriage and exercise of parental care. Banks and Kahn suggest that when a sibling relationship achieves an extra intensity (such as ours), this can result in a hateful, confusing ambivalence which indicates a clear vacuum of parental care. There has been a failure of parental supervision and use of aggressive/inconsistent parental behaviour.

I am desperate for playtime to finish, unlike all my contemporaries. For me the return to the classroom is a return to a haven, safe, warm, comfortable. It is also exciting. I am beginning to learn that this is something I can do well, that I get right for a grownup, that I receive praise and warm words for. It is music to my ears, recently blasted by the sour breath of a frustrated, over-burdened, anxiety-driven child."

And so it was throughout their childhood together, Jean discharging her mother's responsibilities with a conscientiousness and a ferocity of resentment which seemed to grow unchecked over their childhood years. Susan felt herself to be simultaneously cared for and vilified by an inexplicably hostile and powerful sister who switched alarmingly from mothering to malice at will. Their mother did not check Jean in her dealings with Susan; too preoccupied with her own woes, sinking ever deeper into depression, Jean established a custodial regime over Susan which delivered

³¹ The answer to the question of why I went through Primary School friendless lay more in bureaucratic imperatives than it did in personal inadequacy, but it took me many years to work this out. In 1952, the year I was five, Primary Schools in my area operated a once-a-year school intake so I started school in September 1952, two weeks after my fifth birthday. But this meant I was a school year behind my age cohort with whom I would go through school. I needed to catch them up. The school's solution to this was to put children in my situation into the Reception class for one term only, then to move them to a Transitional class (children who had started the previous year but for some reason were 'held back') for one term, and finally to join my age cohort in the summer term. This is what happened to me. Catherine had been my friend in the Reception class but left at Christmas. In the new year I went back into a new class where I knew no-one and where friendships had already been forged amongst the girls. This situation was repeated to a more marked degree in the summer term where I had even less chance to break into established friendship networks. Academically I coped with this fast tracking without a stumble; socially I was floored from the start.

faultless care as required by their mother along with what felt like a rage-filled and increasingly desperate viciousness.³²

As a child Susan had simply not understood why she was so hated by her sister. She understood that she *was* hated, but she also looked to Jean for care, for being looked after. It was very confusing.³³ There were times when she hated Jean back with an intensity which scared her. Oh yes, that huge fight when Susan had grabbed her mother's rolling pin left out on the kitchen table and thumped Jean over the head with it, for once in her childhood winning the argument. But mainly she fought ineffectually against her, hampered not only by her smaller size, her younger age, but by her dependency, her need to be taken care of. She never dared push it too far with Jean, she needed her far too much. As much as Susan loved her mother, had a profoundly anxious attachment to her, she felt from the earliest age that her mother was flaky. Yes, that had always been her private word for her mother. Flaky. Much later, it will be a word that, again in private, she will, astonishingly, apply to her sister.

Poor Jean; matters did not improve, because Susan also passed her 11+ examination and took up a place at the same girls' Grammar School as her sister. Oh lord, remembered Susan, had *that* been a bad move.

³² Psychological perspectives provide us with the insight that when a child's needs for respect, support, understanding, sympathy and mirroring are routinely disregarded then serious consequences follow. One such consequence may be an individual's inability to consciously experience feelings which are not allowed or unrecognised by the parents, such as jealousy, envy, anger. Later on in life such individuals will have to deal with situations in which these feelings arise, but where they are unable to process or understand them. Milner, (1986) refers to something she calls 'blind thinking'. 'My wandering thoughts ...were guided by feelings, it believed on the whole just what it wanted to believe, though it always liked to pretend that it had taken the facts into account and acted reasonably' (p 123). This feels significant for our sistering story.

³³ Banks and Kahn (1982) use a phrase to describe this which encapsulates my feelings here; 'a malevolent protector, a vindictive carer'.

The day for the 11+ results is here. I have been up since first light, as has my mother. I am conscious of the tension in the house emanating from my mother and heightened to an unbearable level within myself. I instinctively know how much is riding on my passing the exam. My mother wants me to do as well as my older sister, partly for my sake, and for her own satisfaction of having two daughters pass to the grammar school with the attendant kudos she will derive from that. But crucially for the opportunities, denied to herself, this will afford her daughters. As for myself, I desperately want to follow my big sister to the same school; partly to prove that I am not completely useless as pronounced many times a day by her, but also because I know in my heart that I love school and that I will get access to a much better experience of it at grammar school. I passionately want to learn.

And there is another reason. I have always been to the same school as my sister, and whilst she rages against the imposed mothering role this has earned her due to my inability to find my feet and friends in primary school, I am terrified at the prospect of going to a different school from her. I have no experience of having to make my own way; this has been denied me through kindness and grim duty. I do not realise until many years later that it would probably have been the making of me,

and her, and our subsequent sistering relationship, if I had indeed attended a different school. As it is, my mother is worried sick that if I am designated to a different school from my sister she will have to find the cost of two school uniforms, instead of passing on my sister's hand-me-downs to me. She prays fervently that not only will I pass the exam but get a place at the same school also.

It is a beautiful early summer's morning in June 1958. I go out and wander fretfully around the garden. Back into the house, out into the garden again. My sister lurks in our bedroom waiting to hear the worst. Will the postman never come? Mum bangs breakfast dishes around the kitchen. Both of us are acutely trained on hearing the letterbox clang. It doesn't. Instead there is an unexpected knock at the kitchen door. Opening it, we see our postman standing there with a broad grin on his face. He knows well enough that this morning he is carrying the destiny of local children in his sack, and he can identify who is going where by the size and colour of the letters. Small, white envelopes are the emblem of failure; large brown envelopes the badge of success. How I know this aged 10 I do not know, but I do. There are many white and very few brown envelopes in his sack for the children of this neighbourhood."

³⁴ For seminal research on the structural connections between social class and educational opportunity emanating from this period see in particular Jackson and Marsden (1962), a study which gave me my own story for the first time. But I have yet to find any thorough investigation of some of the sheer randomness in factors

'I thought you might be waiting for this', he says, and hands to Mum a large, brown envelope. 'Well done kid', he winks at me, and saunters off, whilst we stand there, conscious that one of two key questions is answered.

'Well', says Mum, taking a deep breath and opening the envelope, 'we know you have passed Susan, so you have done very well.' And by now she has the letter opened and is slowly, hesitatingly, scanning it, unfamiliar with the official language. Craning my neck I read it much faster and whoop as I see the named school. It is indeed my sister's school. My mother breaks into a relieved exclamation, scoops me up in a congratulatory hug, before running outside to tell my father, already installed underneath the latest wrecked car.³⁵

Slowly he emerges, feet first, wiping his hands on a greasy rag, and for once actually looks pleased with me. 'Well done,' he says

operating in respect of educational chances, Dale Spender's (Spender 1982) excellent research notwithstanding. This fascinates me about educational opportunity and achievement. I grew up in a working class, run-down street, albeit in a suburban location, and on the edge of a much more middle class residential district. My sister and I by pure chance fell into the catchment area of the high-achieving primary school which catered for the professional families living in the nearby leafy roads. Living a few further streets away, and we would have attended a different school, with I have no doubt, very different educational outcomes. As it was, every other child on our street with only one exception, failed their 11+ examination and went to the local Secondary Modern school. We were marked out by this and I was left in no doubt by the next door neighbour that I had crossed some unknown line. Asked if I had passed 'the scholarship' and told I had, she pursed her lips, gave a loud sniff and informed me that 'no doubt it'll cost 'alf a crown to speak to thee from now on.' I had no idea what she meant at the time but soon learnt.

³⁵ My father was obsessed with cars and devoted a great deal of his time to renovating old wrecks instead of getting on with building up his small business and bringing in an income to support his family.

to me, 'you must have got some brains from somewhere. I expect you get them from me.' And having thus appropriated my academic success to his own gene pool and satisfaction, he turns away.

My mother's prayers, and mine, are answered. My sister's are not.

There is no sound from her in our bedroom. She has heard it all of course, and, all her hopes, her longings to be free of this trying little sister lie in ashes. What she dreaded has come about. She cries bitterly, sitting on her bed, contemplating the endless sentence which lies ahead. She has to face this crisis by herself, for she knows that she will have to keep her feelings hidden. There is not the remotest possibility of them being acknowledged, let alone understood. Another secret to keep, more lies to enact. She is a much burdened older child, staggering under the weight of an inappropriate, all-encompassing minimother role.

Some time later my parents receive a letter from the Local Education Authority. It informs them that I have achieved one of the highest scores in the 11+ exam in the authority and should my parents wish it, they can change my school preference to the Girls High School. Only the top few per cent get this offer. The Girls High School is a grant maintained school, taking mainly fee paying pupils along with a few of the brightest

scholarship girls in the city. Its reputation places it as easily one of the best schools in the region. It offers a superb educational opportunity.

My mother does not think about it for longer than a few seconds. It would mean the cost of two different school uniforms. It is out of the question. And it would mean that I would have to face a new big school on my own. A very posh one at that, with children drawn from the kind of homes my mother can only glance at in the magazines on the newsagent's shelf. No, not for the likes of us and certainly not for me; I wouldn't cope well. There was a lot to be said for knowing one's place in life and understanding how far one can go without getting above oneself. She was already going to have to take some heavy criticism from her brother about 'wasting' education on mere girls, when his two boys have both failed the 11+ and settled into the local Secondary Modern quite happily. Far better for me to go to the same school as my sister where she can continue to look after me. Nice for both of us, too. That settled, the letter goes into her apron pocket as she moves on to more pressing daily matters.

I am not consulted, or even informed about this possible change in my life trajectory until years later.

Susan reflects that it was probably from this time that her feelings towards her sister shifted. Grammar school allowed her to start, little by little, to detach, to find some kind of separateness from Jean, some degree of distance. Shakily at first, and then with growing confidence and pleasure, Susan found her feet and her friends. Jean made it clear, far more openly than she had dared to do before, that as far as she was concerned Susan was *persona non grata* at school. She had to go on the same school bus with her, but never sat with her, always finding a girl she knew to talk to, and once at school it was as though Susan was invisible. Many a time friends of Jean pointed Susan out.

- Look, your little sister's there, Jean. Aren't you going to speak to her?

Face averted, Jean stomped past, dishing out the blanking treatment every time. Her friends stopped pointing out Susan in the end. They didn't understand but they got the message.

But increasingly Susan didn't mind. She had felt hurt to start with, but she was able to carve out her own niche, membership of her own little gang – except it wasn't called anything so common as a 'gang' in this school – and she began to flourish. Music had been the key. Seduced by the offer of learning to play a violin, a recorder, she played in the recorder group, the school orchestra, sang in the choir, became a member of the Madrigals ensemble, started up a string quartet with her close school friends who were all musical. She took her turn as form captain, games captain, solid centre forward in the netball team, a reserve tennis player if one of the team players dropped out. Jean had done none of these things. Susan found herself

wondering about her sister at Grammar School. For all her academic capabilities and her studiousness – she was a good academic pupil and went on to achieve three high passes in her 'A' levels – she stayed resolutely away from all the extra-curricula offerings the school provided. As did all her friends in fact. Odd that, when you come to think of it. And she was awfully antagonistic to Susan's involvement in these activities. It was as though she took it as a personal affront; sarcastic, critical, derisory, Jean seemed to go out of her way to trash Susan's music and friends. What seemed to particularly rile her was the middle-classness of her sister's friends and their interests.³⁶

³⁶ I want to explore here the transformative impact which educational opportunities, offered through the middle class filter of the grammar school, had on our sistering relationship. Social class is not simply a social experience. There is an internalisation of class, a psychology of class I would argue. My sister identified much more strongly with working class roots and culture than I did, and whilst I can only speculate about the reasons for this, some research provides useful pointers. Frazer (1988) argues that school girls' different discourses about social class (as well as gender and race) and their own social world are dependent on their ability to access different discourses circulating in society. This helps the girls to frame their experience but can also limit their ability to understand it. I was sharply aware that her attack on my school life and friends was mounted in highly specific class-based terms. She objected to my friends and interests because she perceived them to be 'middle class' and she had set her face against this culture. I was aware of this antagonism from an early age, albeit unable to name it until much older. At the age of five I was sent along with my sister to elocution lessons by our mother who was ambitious for us in her way and who had an unshaken belief that the ability to 'speak nicely' was *the* passport to the good (i.e. middle class) life. I took to the lessons like the proverbial duck but my sister resisted with an unspoken but determined obstinacy. She went to the lessons dutifully but refused to articulate her vowels in anything other than Yorkshire dialect. My sister then appears to have resisted certain 'dominant meanings' in a way which I did not. And my mother may have been on to something after all. My ability to 'speak the part' certainly eased my passage through Grammar School and friends' middle class homes. How crucial was this 'voice' and the enculturated middle class values absorbed along with the received pronunciation in determining the different trajectories followed by my sister and myself? How big a part did it play in the construction of my identity and subsequent distancing from my sister? What role did it play in my willingness to access a transformative therapeutic journey which has been resolutely rejected by my sister? I am running ahead of my narrative. What I am really talking about here of course is the dodgy practice of border crossing and why some of us will chance it and others will not. See Behar (1993; 1996) for a discussion of 'border crossing' in this context. Here in our school days, it is enough to suggest that my friends and interests exemplified the distance I had travelled from her influence and the emergence of my separate identity. And as for so many traumatised children whose key defence in dealing with life is increasingly predicated on control of others, this alone presented a challenge to Jean.

At home things changed too. A subtle shift began in their separate relationships with their parents, especially with their mother. With the coming of puberty, arriving very early at eleven years for Jean, she began to withdraw from her role as her mother's confidante. Was there a connection between these events, Susan speculated? It wouldn't surprise her. One of the shocking things her mother had done around this time was to give her eldest daughter the responsibility of telling her youngest about menstruation. At the time, Susan had regarded the whole thing as a bit of a joke, but now, years later and with a daughter of her own around that same age, Susan winced to remember it. Her own childish ignorance had her pursuing Jean round the house shrieking with laughter, asking her what on earth *that* was stuffed down her knickers? Her mother going silent, Jean furious but also unusually upset, slamming their bedroom door shut. Asking her mother what it was all about, what for? And her mother, oh, shameful really, telling her to ask Jean, that Jean would explain, she really couldn't talk about it, couldn't say. And Jean, poor girl, actually did find a way, out of the ingrained habit of duty and compliance, to explain the basics of periods and sanitary towels and belts to her younger sister. What a fundamental abdication of maternal duty, Susan now thinks, and her heart contracts in compassion for that young Jean.

Whether this incident was the stimulus or whether it was just a developing sense of herself and the ever bigger world out there, but Jean's desire to be free of the confidante role at least led her to spend more and more time away from home.

- She's always round at her friends, complained Mum. We never get to see her these days. As often as not she's not even here for tea. I don't know why she can't spend more time with her own family instead of other people's.

Indeed.

Reaching adolescence also meant reaching for boys, and wow, did Jean get going young, remembers Susan with an inward smile. At eleven to Jean's thirteen, and a very young eleven at that, Susan found her sister's sudden interest in boys totally inexplicable. Understood or not, it made its impact on her. For a start it meant that her sister was no longer *there* in her life as in the all-embracing earlier times, and this was a big change. Susan found some space at home for the first time; it was just her and her mother usually until her sister came in. Not surprising then that Susan found herself being drawn into the confidante role by her mother in her turn. Perhaps because she was older than her sister when she was given this role and thus more able to cope with it, but the fact was that she never rebelled against it; was still performing it right up to the end. It was now the younger daughter's turn to listen, listen for hours on end as she combed and styled her mother's hair, to many hours of complaint, misery, anger, fantasy and ramblings.

These sessions became a crucial focus of her time with her mother throughout her teenage years and, despite the sadness of hearing her mother's distress pouring out day after day, Susan cherished these hours together. Throughout her early childhood, with her sister in the much more active and dominant role, she had missed her mother. It was as simple as

that. The activity of combing her mother's hair, which her mother loved as a small relaxation treat, brought Susan into close physical contact with the mother she had always yearned for. Those hours spent in the kitchen at home, her mother sitting upright on an old kitchen chair whilst Susan combed and brushed, teased and backcombed, inventing ever more extraordinary styles which made her mother interrupt her monologue and laugh into the mirror Susan held up for her. Yes, it forged a strong bond of intimacy between them which stayed intact until her mother's death.³⁷ It also enmeshed her ever deeper with the increasingly awful hell of home, spending most of her free time there just as her sister, wisely with hindsight, got herself out of it.³⁸ Her mother turned to Susan increasingly as the years passed, aware if not comprehending that somehow she had lost her older daughter. These were the years when she began to say how differently Jean had turned out from what she had expected, how disappointed she was that she seemed to care so little for her family, meaning herself of course.³⁹ That her mother was sinking ever deeper into mental illness was not an insight available to Susan at this point, but she did eventually begin to understand that she was dealing with never-to-be-resolved depressive behaviour.

By thirteen Jean had got herself a serious and much older boyfriend. Susan was made privy to this information only because she was necessary to Jean's

³⁷ This was manifested strongly in my mother's relationship with me in her final illness but also explains my father's telephone call to me rather than my sister when our mother collapsed. My father had recognised for many years which daughter had the closest relationship with Rose, but had given no prior indication of this view.

³⁸ As Miller (1987a) points out 'children who are intelligent, alert, attentive, sensitive, and completely attuned to their mother's well-being are entirely at her disposal. Transparent, clear and reliable, they are easy to manipulate as long as their true self (their emotional world) remains in the cellar of the glass house in which they have to live – sometimes until...they come into therapy' (pp25-26).

³⁹ In view of what ultimately took place between my sister and father I recall my mother's prescient words here with a shiver; 'Jean gets more like yer father every day...'

success in the hot pursuit of this relationship. Jean needed *her*, Susan realised, and almost caught herself thinking 'for the first time', but actually, no. Surely Jean's dutiful compliance with their mother's excessive demands, her thoroughness in performing her 'mothering' role must say something about Jean's deep need for Susan too during their early childhood.⁴⁰ Jean's later need of Susan to help her pursue boyfriends was only ever acknowledged by Jean's standard – and telling – phrase:

- You owe me, Susan.⁴¹

Jean's need of Susan, apart from the usual low level stuff like lying to their mother as to Jean's whereabouts, was centred on their father. Their father presented a massive challenge. To argue with him, defy him, oppose him, even in the smallest of matters, called down a cataclysmic rage, an intractable opposition. He demanded unquestioning obedience from wife and children; he would *not* allow any challenge to his authority. The Lord had made him the head of this family and they would all accept that, like it or not. Many years later both sisters, in different places and to different friends, would remark that it had been like growing up under the Taliban.

- Oh yes, Susan would joke, our own little Kabul it was.

- My god, Jean would explode, he made the Taliban look like Dad's Army.

⁴⁰ I am grateful for this key insight arising from therapeutic work with a Jungian analyst.

⁴¹ Behind this assertion of my sister's lies something else I feel. And this is a secret and all the many ramifications of that secret for my sister. Because my sister maintains her silence on this I would argue that silence lay at the heart of our sistering from start to finish.

He was impossible. He was also terrifying, and no more so than to Jean, who had never stood up to him, never argued back, never could be found in the same room as him, now Susan came to think of it. Susan on the other hand had always responded to her father's unreasonable dictates with fury and outright defiance. Time and again, and increasingly as she got older and more articulate, she gave back as good as got. She poured withering scorn on his attitudes, she openly denounced his church and god and to his incoherent fury declared herself an atheist. Trust an adolescent to know exactly where to put the knife in. She ran rings around him verbally. Time and again she physically intervened between him and her mother to protect her. Shaking with outrage, vibrating with injustice, spitting defiance, she stood her ground and took the consequences.⁴² Which were brutal of course as well as banal.

She remembers her first attempt to go out wearing some make up. She was seventeen, and she stood in front of her father in the kitchen with a wisp of pink lipstick and a smudge of green eye shadow. He had grabbed her by her hair, dragged her to the sink, and reaching down found her mother's

⁴² I confess to a failure in my ability to explain, push my insight any further, in relation to my lack of understanding about our so different responses to our father's tyranny. I can understand my sister's response much better than mine in relation to the trauma she suffered, the secret she had to keep, the debilitating fear she faced every day. But where did my oppositional defiance come from? Much psychological research has been devoted to the differing personalities and characters of siblings in relation to birth order. See the views of Adler in Stein (2006) and Sulloway (1996) for just two texts. Whatever the reason, it was always very clear to me that a high price would be exacted for it. The best I can do is to say that it is accounted for no doubt by some personality traits (along with birth order position?) but also a strong sense of justice instilled into me by my mother when telling her stories of childhood deprivation and inequality. I think in some kind of way this imbued me with a lifelong impulse to challenge unfairness wherever I perceive it. And I certainly knew instinctively that what my father meted out was unjust and based on a superior physical and social domination which I refused to accept. So are socialist feminists made!

scrubbing brush. Holding her head in a vice under the cold water tap he had taken the brush to her face, ripping her cheeks, her eyes, her mouth.

Later on she actively encouraged her mother's tentative defiance too. She thinks of the slacks scene. It seems unbelievable now but her father banned her mother from wearing trousers.

- Only one person in this house gets to wear....

Her mother had longed for a pair of slacks, black jersey, very plain, very neat, Marks and Spencers' finest for women of a certain age. Susan went with her mother to buy them, and at home she tried them on, nervous but excited. And yes, they fitted well, and were extremely comfy and warm and practical. Daringly she kept them on and the balloon as expected went up as soon as her father walked through the door.

- No wife of mine....

- I'm ordering you upstairs to change....

- 'The Lord said 'get thee behind me satan....'

- I'll *make* you take them off in a minute....

Susan had instructed her mother to stay where she was and keep her sensible slacks on. And she did, and they won, so her mother got to wear trousers on

the day she collapsed. Trousers *and* corsets. At the same time. A fitting comment on her mother's life.

They all got to wear trousers and make up, and Jean, later Susan, got to have boyfriends. But not without huge, punishing, dangerous fights waged by Susan with her father.

For Jean, unable to face her father but desperate to win some freedom, realised that Susan held the key. Looking back years later Susan thinks that this had possibly been the most confusing and painful period of her relationship with Jean. Jean would stay in the background but 'egg on' Susan to challenge a rule, defy an edict. 'These were the years of 'The Sting' as Susan later learned to think of them.⁴³ Many years later Susan is able to reflect that the passing of several more decades has still not wised her up to 'The Sting'. There will in fact be a final 'sting' between these two sisters with wholly unforeseeable and life changing consequences, but this is in the future.

For now, these are the years and the experiences which give Susan the frightening knowledge which will stay with her for her life; that her sister is dangerous. This knowledge lodges inside, is absorbed into her instincts, sometimes lulled by the kindness and care of her sister into a temporary forgetfulness, but always, always, there will come a point when she will be made to remember. How she will be made to remember.⁴⁴

⁴³Miller (1987a) says 'a child can never see through unconscious manipulation. It is like the air he (sic) breathes; he knows no other, and it appears to him (sic) to be the only breathable air' (p 24).

⁴⁴ I draw on the research into personality disorders which have enabled me to gain some insight into my sister's behaviour. Notoriously difficult to define and

By the time they had both left school and moved on, Jean to an all – female teacher training college a few miles away from home, and Susan to a spanking new concrete and glass university two hundred miles away, a large distance, of the non physical kind, had opened up between the sisters.⁴⁵ In fact, it was only when she became settled at university that Susan allowed herself to acknowledge how much she had grown to dislike, to fear her sister, how painful her experience of Jean had been, and how much she wanted to let the relationship quietly sink beneath the waves.

It turned out however that Jean seemed to have a different idea. What prompted her to get back in touch with Susan? And to doggedly pursue her

generating some controversy, there seems to be some consensus in the psychotherapeutic world although the typology is often criticised as too categorical. Notwithstanding this, personality disorders are deemed to represent extreme or significant deviations from the way the average individual perceives, thinks, feels and relates to others. They are associated with subjective distress and problems with functioning in social situations. Gerhardt (2010) says '[it is] the borderline personality [who] is most liable to manage his feelings by splitting, projecting and compartmentalising' (p 181) and goes on to point out that children who have been abused or frightened by an aggressive parent experience extreme helplessness. 'One way that [such] children gain mastery over their own experience of helplessness...is by attacking those who are weaker than themselves' (p 239). Significantly for myself and my assertion of experiencing my sister as dangerous she carries on to say 'Children who have experienced chronic exposure to mental abuses such as teasing, belittlement and humiliation, often develop a paranoid outlook, and a tendency to view other people as hostile and dangerous' (p 240).

⁴⁵ In respect of educational status as well as quality of educational delivery there was a huge gap between my sister's experience of higher education and mine. It served to reinforce the different trajectories we took through a working class childhood to some version of a middle class professional life. My sister's teacher training college was all-female, parochial in outlook and catchment area and culturally belonged more to the 1940s or '50s than the '60s. She got a reasonably proficient vocational training from it but no wider cultural or intellectual experience. She made it clear that she found it a hugely frustrating and narrow experience. I found myself at one of the 'new' glass and concrete campus universities, massively primed with high quality educational resources and mixing with a student population largely drawn from a Home Counties, privately educated, affluent middle class. It could not have been more different from where I came from and it certainly presented me with a frightening social and cultural challenge. But it was also an immensely exciting, richly endowed, mind-expanding intellectual and cultural milieu which I grasped with both hands and have never failed to acknowledge as one of the real pieces of good fortune in my life.

until Susan reluctantly replied. Susan didn't get an intimation of the answer to this question until many years later.⁴⁶ Bit by bit she felt reeled in, caught up again in the complicated pattern of being big and little sister together. Yes, they were now both adults with their independent lives, but moving at a lower level, in a kind of counterpoint to their conscious sisterhood, the habits of domination and submission, of caretaking and dependence took hold again, and held each of them in their thrall.⁴⁷

Susan gets off the bus and starts the long walk, uphill again, to the divisional office. Going in to meet her new colleagues, they are friendly, welcoming, immediately concerned when she explains why she will need to leave straight after the meeting. She is to be grateful to her Divisional boss over the following few months in his quiet understanding of her circumstances and the cover he provides for her, but for now, meeting

⁴⁶ I do not want to pre-empt the narrative here, to provide a view which may colour the reader's view before the tale is told. But there is another matter here, which is that I didn't know I had an answer to this question when I wrote the sentence. It slowly emerged for me (and I trusted it would and it did) *through and because* of the writing of the narrative. This is my experience of *writing as inquiry*. For a discussion of this methodology see Clough (2002), Goldberg (1986), Pelias (1999), Richardson (1990), Richardson (2000) and Speedy(2005) for a small selection of viewpoints. What I have learned is that the way I write alters profoundly both the meaning of what I am exploring and generates very different insights and feelings inside me as a writer. By writing this story I know I am writing *my* story of *the* story(ies) of my sistering relationship. And through the writing of it I move myself on from my confusion and sistering crisis to another, more knowing place. The act of writing itself produces insight, knowledge, which arises out of my experience being recorded by the act of writing about it. But over and above this, the writing 'I' rescues, transforms the 'I' of the story. So I am changed in the writing of this story. Already I am a different 'I' to the one I begin to present here to the reader. The 'me' which is still becoming perhaps renders autoethnography a transient task, but a narrative re-framing helps to integrate experience, make a coherent meaning of one's self. This has implications for research writings. For as Richardson (2000) says writing is never innocent. For over and above the narrative which is told are the experiences, the feelings, the processes. I am interested in how I express myself around these experiences. Which words do I choose to tell my story? Which are the metaphors I pick and why? Why do I select certain bits of my story to present you the reader with and not other bits? And in the choice of how stories are told, what changes for the reader, what changes for the *writer*? And, crucially, what changes for the meaning of the story?

⁴⁷ I am referring here to the many and different strategies which are adopted by the more powerful dominant sister to maintain her position and those of the subordinate and relatively powerless sister to resist it.

endured, she turns her face once more towards home, fearing the worst, heart
aching, tears threatening, sister waiting.

Chapter Two Pulling Together and Falling Apart⁴⁸

Years later Susan reflected that it was the few hours following her return from work that morning which changed everything between the two sisters. That was when the tectonic plates of sisterhood began their subterranean movement, carrying each sister in a direction unimaginable to them at that moment.⁴⁹

Susan walks into her parents' home and pauses. The chaos in the kitchen had been cleared up and she can see evidence of her sister's housework on the cooker, the fireplace, the fridge. Jean has made a small dent in the accumulated disorganised mess that has come to be habitual over the last few years but there is a long way to go. Susan's heart sinks even lower as it dawns on her what is in store. Whatever the diagnosis they can't let their mother carry on like this. For the last two years her parents have not spoken to each

⁴⁸ I choose to continue the narrative as a mix of third person and first person tellings. I do this partly as a literary device but also as a strategy for trying to maintain some balance in writing about my sister within an autoethnographical context. I am unsure about this even now, about whether it is ever possible to achieve 'balance' from such a situated, partial, reflexive position. And is it necessary or desirable anyway? Arguably not so, when employing this methodology, so I have to acknowledge it is rather more about problematising ethical considerations which loom large for me. In short, how to give my sister a fair hearing in her absence? A further note on this methodology. I take it to be a multi-layered, intertextual case study that integrates private and social experience and ties autobiographical writing to sociological writing (Ellis 1995). Why do I use it? I sit firmly with Ellis; a goal is the evocation of the readers' experience, making sociology an intimate conversation about feeling, relating, acting (Ellis 1995). This kind of knowledge she (and I) assert is more likely to be gained by actively getting close to the text rather than as a distanced spectator. And I, like her, accept that such narrative accounts will be partial, historically situated and mediated. I want to write about the self in order that the reader can know about the 'other', I want to promote a dialogue which leads to learning about social processes and social life (Bochner and Ellis 2000). I assert that performative autoethnographical writing is a valuable tool for promoting such learning.

⁴⁹ My sister and I had what is termed 'a high access' bond (Banks and Kahn 1982) which refers to the intensity of the emotional relationship between siblings and which may be characterised by either positive or negative emotions. Any change, shift, in our sistering relationship had been unthinkable for both of us up to this point.

other. This has happened before and has been in fact a regular, unwelcome feature of their family life down the years. Susan in particular has found herself in the grim role of go-between, reluctantly conveying messages between the two of them. This time it is more severe and has produced an extraordinary act of rebellion from her mother in the form of a court injunction taken out against her husband, to what purpose everyone is unclear, most of all Rose herself. But there it is. They live in the same small house and go about their separate lives, neither prepared to take responsibility for household chores they each feel the other should do; her father assumes it is his right to be serviced by his wife and have his home looked after for him and her mother has finally rebelled against clearing up after a dirty man with the lowest standards of personal hygiene.

So the house has slowly subsided into its current depressing state. Susan has done some minimal sorting out, clearing away when she visits, but most of the time is taken up with her concern for her mother, sitting for hours at a time in the kitchen, endlessly twirling strands of hair, a habit of hers, so that she looks like a bizarre old version of those small girls one sometimes sees with the wiry afro hair tightly wound into little plaits covering their heads. On little girls it looks cute; on her mother it looks demented, spikes wildly sticking out in all directions. Needles of pain made manifest.

That her mother is depressed is palpable, but she has already been down the path of Valium heaven and spent a brave and silent year weaning herself off the addiction, unknown to her daughters at the time.⁵⁰ This is one more

⁵⁰ In the 1970s anti-depressant drugs of which 'Valium' was the favoured one were widely and routinely over-prescribed by doctors. Middle-aged or older women in particular presenting symptoms of depression, anxiety attacks and so on found

reason Susan has to be furious with her mother's GP, dishing out anti-depressants like Smarties, no doubt to get yet another despairing middle aged woman out of his surgery in the quickest possible time. So the last thing Susan is about to suggest is more happy pills. But other suggestions, marriage guidance tentatively put forward, more general counselling, finding another church where she feels accepted and at home, moving out into a council house, all fall at the feet of this defeated, locked-in woman.⁵¹

Susan feels completely defeated too; by her mother's misery, by her parents' shockingly destructive marriage to which there seems no end and no solution. She worries about it and gets caught up in her mother's misery much more than Jean, she knows. Jean has perfected the technique over the years, as far as Susan is concerned, of putting in the requisite appearances, doing what needs to be done to conform to the role of dutiful daughter, but has cut off from her parents' marriage, from the close daughterly relationship. What she began in adolescence as a bid for freedom, a move to escape from the inappropriate, harming role dumped on her by her mother, she has built on steadily. Always conscientious, never undutiful, but never really *present* either. Susan can't quite explain it to herself, what she means by this sense of Jean somehow not really *being* there, it is just a feeling. And

themselves on long term medication with Valium. My mother was one of these women. Research (see O'Brien, 2005) later found that the drug was highly addictive. Again I stress the feminist argument that this medical practice was a manifestation of patriarchy in the subordination of women's health to the requirements of 'invisibilising' women's concerns and pharmaceutical profits (see radical feminist writers, for example, Firestone 1970 and Daly 1978).

⁵¹ A large part of my mother's situation can be attributed to the lack of financial resources which she, along with the majority of women, experienced (and still do in comparison with men as UN data repeatedly tells us (see http://www.unicef.org/gender/index_biqpicture.html). This is not to say that had she had access to sufficient resources she would have made her move for independence and happiness. But that would have given her a choice. As it was she had her state pension in her own name (and even that she had to fight, with my help, to keep) and nothing more.

as ever, her feelings around Jean are confusing, ambivalent at best and antipathetic on bad days.

They have re-established a rhythm, a pattern to their relationship. Jean is still undisputed big sister, and in this role gives Susan a great deal of practical support, which Susan both appreciates and resents. Ever since Susan has been a single parent Jean has made an extra effort to become 'family' to Susan.⁵² She has included her and the children on their holidays, taken usually in damp Welsh cottages chosen by Jean and involving mammoth shops for local food and hours of wrestling with entirely useless appliances to deliver faultless meals at regular intervals. Susan would quite happily have stocked up on cheese and broccoli quiches and frozen chips from Sainsbury's. Not that she isn't into food herself, and has learned to catch up her big sister in the cooking skills department, but she went along with Jean's dictum on the matter. It made life easier and Susan feels that so far life is tough enough and any help is welcome.

There is certainly none forthcoming from her parents. Her father's line on her divorce has predictably been of the making of beds and lying on them variety, and her mother wrings her hands in distress and pushes sad little food parcels into Susan's hands when her father isn't looking. The cats think it is Christmas. They do very well on years-old tinned sardines and Pek

⁵² The idea of 'family' was important to my sister; she put far more store by it than I did. My childhood experience (and a close reading of the feminist canon on the subject) led me to pull away, to experience a deep ambiguity at best and hostility at worst for the 'family'. My sister seemed driven in the opposite direction by her experiences; a need to re-create, to fashion a 'family' for herself, of which I was clearly a crucial component. But whilst my sister insisted on the importance of our 'family', my experience of the quality of interaction she and I were able to offer each other in this forum points to the impossibility of 'doing' a relationship in a context in which the individuals concerned have only ever had negative and destructive experiences.

chopped pork, dug out by Rose from one of her many suitcases festering under the beds. Susan and Jean do sometimes idly speculate together that their mother is in serious danger of getting blown up by exploding cans of pre-war best salmon.⁵³ But this is the extent to which Rose can go in understanding and supporting her younger daughter. And it never occurs to Susan to expect anything more. Both of them have become habituated over the previous two decades to Rose becoming more and more enmeshed in mental illness, depression and dependency, and Susan on parenting her mother as best she knows how.⁵⁴

So Susan accepts all the help Jean gives her and acquiesces to the low level bullying, the dictatorial behaviour, the rules delivered from on high, as the price. The familiarity of the roles between them was like a long worn scratchy rug, prickly but warm. What Susan does begin to appreciate, much more clearly than she did as a child, is that her sister's kindness and generosity always comes with a price tag attached. The phrase which Jean began to use openly in her illicit adolescent courting days – 'you owe me' – is used without hesitation now when Jean wants something back.⁵⁵ And it has

⁵³ Many people, housewives especially, began hoarding any tins of foodstuffs they were able to get their hands on during World War Two and some carried this practice through the rest of their lives. My mother was one of these and probably at the extreme end of the tradition. My sister and I grew up in a tiny house which was stuffed to the eaves with boxes, suitcases, bags, full of out-of-date canned foodstuffs.

⁵⁴ This was not a great deal. As someone once said (source forgotten) the way we parent is usually the way it was done for us. What strikes me here though is that whilst still locked into a 'positioned discourse' role of 'little sister' I had thoroughly taken over the aspect of my sister's minimothering role in relation to our mother. As Davies and Harré (1990) point out we shift from one to another way of thinking about ourselves as the discourse shifts and as our positions within varying story lines are taken up.

⁵⁵ Banks and Kahn (1982) point out that when a 'twinning' and 'blurring' process has gone on between two sisters, within a context of a highly conflictual parental marriage and inappropriate/unavailable parenting, it may be that the caretaker sister cannot see the younger child as a separate person. She may be driven to shape that child to her own purposes. If rebuffed she may aggressively escalate the

to be said that Susan very rarely offers anything back to Jean unless coerced into doing so. She is too used to a lifetime's one way flow from big to little sister, too seething with unexpressed, unacknowledged resentment, hidden dislike and fear of her sister to offer anything generously.

Now crossing the tiny hall to the sitting room, Susan pushes open the door with dread to find her mother, dressed properly now and shakily propped up by cushions on the old turquoise velveteen sofa.

She is never to forget her mother's smile in this moment. Her mother turns her head slowly as Susan enters the room, there is a second of confusion on her face, and then recognition of her younger daughter. The huge smile of pleasure and relief which comes transforms her mother and transfixes Susan to the spot. What is there in that smile? What it holds, its silent eloquence, fills the space between the two women. It seems to Susan, remembering years later, that it contains unforced, transcendent delight. It illuminates a profound love whilst conveying a clear certainty that her safe pair of hands has arrived. Susan is overwhelmed by both her mother's love and the sudden knowledge that her mother is depending on her to make it better, to do what has to be done.

She drops onto the sofa and takes her mother's hand, gently kissing her cheek.

- Well, I don't know Mum, she says, you've managed to give us all a turn.

pressure and threats. They quote further research which indicates that caretaker siblings are commonly high handed and arbitrary with their younger siblings.

Striving for the light touch, the reassuring voice.

- 'The doctor's been, says her father, and it's not so bad after all, she's given us all a fright for nothing.

Susan catches the tone, understands immediately the all-too-ready-to-believe-the-best line proffered to a frightened man, and looks at her sister inquiringly.

Jean, clearly upset but in control, gives Susan an edited version of the doctor's diagnosis. Pernicious anaemia-led collapse, exacerbated by poor diet and self-care.

- So what we're going to do Susan, she says decisively, is to take Mum back home with us for a few days, lots of rest, lots of nice meals.

- Yes, agrees Dad, too quickly, that will be for the best I think, won't it Rose? What do you say to that?

And everyone in the room turns to the stricken woman who sits clutching Susan's hand as if, no, as her life depends on it and Susan looks again, even more closely now, at her mother. She notes her colour, her unfocused eyes, her inert body which will clearly fall without the cushions' support. Her sense of dread and hopelessness which she felt earlier on seeing her mother in bed returns with a powerful conviction which will not give way to the overwhelming desire she has to believe her sister, her father, the now

departed doctor. She looks again at them. Neither of them will meet her eyes. She is suddenly struck by their similarity at this precise moment of crisis; her father she has always known to be at bottom a frightened and cowardly man, shirking the difficult decision, the hard road. Now she sees, in that moment, something she has never really understood before about her sister.

Conscious of her mother's tenacious grip on her hand Susan makes her decision.

- No, Jean, she replies quietly. That won't do. Mum has to go to the hospital and be seen by a doctor there. I'm going to call an ambulance now.

What is truly surprising is that neither contradicts her, or seeks to overrule her.

- W-e-ll, if you think that's for the best, says Jean slowly.
- I suppose it wouldn't hurt to get a second opinion, concurs Dad.

So there it is. Just like that. Susan has taken control of the situation and they have acquiesced. No challenge, no resistance. Both of them look at her as they wait for her to make the moves.

Swirling around the room is an undercurrent, a displacement of something. Years of established patterns of engagement, of dynamics, are silently being

tipped over, so quietly as not to ruffle the surface, much as a tsunami wave must start, slowly, imperceptibly, swelling from the depths.

Susan feels sudden terror. She senses the shift but doesn't yet understand it. She knows only that her big sister has transmuted into someone else she doesn't recognize, and that her father has revealed a fragile dependency hitherto unsuspected.

The responsibility of it all crushes her. And still her mother grips her hand.

The ambulance arrives and as the three of them gather round it whilst the ambulance staff with practiced cheerfulness and expertise load Rose onto a wheelchair and strap her in. Susan finds herself getting into the ambulance on her own. Half in, half out, she pauses and looks back, waiting. Both Walter and Jean have walked back to the kerb. Her father looks simply relieved and even relaxed about waving them off, and to be honest Susan hasn't expected, hasn't wanted, her father to go with them. But she does expect Jean to go with her and now she feels confused, bewildered.

- Aren't you coming Jean? Susan calls.

But Jean, avoiding her eye, moving further back to the pavement, says something about needing to sort childcare out with Peter and if she can she will drive over to the hospital later and join her there. She does not go.

Meanwhile Susan has no choice; the ambulance staff are waiting to get off. The back doors close and Susan finds herself terrifyingly on her own, taking her desperately ill mother into who knows what.

The NHS lives up to its reputation of being wonderful in a crisis; swift admission, exhaustive tests and scans, a thorough case history taken from a now exhausted Susan in the early hours of the next day, followed by the unmistakable, inevitable diagnosis. Inoperable brain tumour. Massive growth. Surgery impossible. Very gently, compassionately, the consultant makes it quite clear that her mother has at most around a month left.

Susan's legs give way and she sits down hard on the chair the consultant already has under her.

- I know it won't mean anything to you at this moment, he says carefully, but you should know that your decision to bring in your mother today has given her a few more weeks. If we hadn't seen her today and got some effective drugs into her, she would not have survived the night.

He is right. It means nothing to her now, but she is profoundly grateful to him for his thoughtfulness in telling her this in the years to follow.

They bring their mother home after ten days, after they make it clear that they will give their still unknowing mother the last few weeks in her own home. The consultant agrees, but warns them how hard it is going to be and

dispatches them with a complicated cocktail of lethal drugs to be administered precisely according to instructions. There can be no mistake.

It is the dispensing of the drugs which gives Susan her first intimation of how impossible her father is going to be; that he, not her mother, is going to present the most difficulty. She draws up a chart for her father, with clear labelling and directions. She sits down with him to go through it, and he doesn't want to know.

- Oh, you two will see to all that, he says, waving an airy hand. I can't be bothered with it.

- No Dad, says Susan firmly, there'll be times when Jean and I won't be here and Mum will need her drugs, so you have to learn how to give them.

- What do you mean, times you both won't be here? What am I supposed to do when you're not here? I can't look after her, oh no, that's your job that is, you're the daughters, you'll do it.

Deep breath. Don't lose it here. This is important.

- Dad, you know perfectly well that we'll do as much as we possibly can but both of us have full time jobs and children. We're both going to ask for some time off work but that still means we'll have to go to work at some points in the week and the children still need looking after.

'There'll be times when you'll be the one looking after Mum so you need to know about her medication.

- Well I'm not. I can't do it. It's too complicated and I'm too old to learn it. You'll do it.

Said with finality.

Susan eyes her father. She reads the signs clearly; she has spent a lifetime surviving her father by reading the signs. And she knows how to play her father at his own game.

- So, she says, I take it that you're quite happy going to meet your maker when your turn comes knowing that you've killed your wife because you couldn't be bothered to learn her medication? That's right is it Dad?

Venomous look. His hand comes out and takes the chart from her.

The pattern of their mother's care and management of their father is set early between the sisters. In truth it is no more in some ways than a continuation of what has gone before. They are both organisers, these sisters, and they share as well a common view of their parents' marriage, and the difficulties presented by Walter. They are used to pulling together on a practical level, to juggling demands and children. They share enough values, attitudes, so as not to have to spend time in discussion, in negotiating. But the sisters' relationship is also shaped of course by their parents, their

parents' relationship with each other and the differing response and engagement the sisters have had with each of them over the years.⁵⁶

For a start, there is an unspoken but completely acknowledged recognition between them that their mother's final days, after an heartrendingly sad life, are going to be as happy as they can make them. But whilst complete agreement exists between them about the importance of their mother's last days, their father is also in the equation. Well, yes. There is the rub. And on that score, it is also unspoken but understood that following the pattern of a lifetime it will be Susan who will challenge him, take him on, sort him out when required. Hence the initial skirmish over the drugs.

It is whilst their mother is in hospital that the sisters sit down and work out what needs to be done, how it can be done, who will do it and when. Neither have any sense of this beginning a transformative process in their relationship, merely a necessity born out of evil. Just like funeral arrangements provide a distraction from the first violent pain of bereavement, so the complicated timetables, shifts, picking up of children and provision of meals helps both women through the first awful days after their mother's diagnosis. They are given some help of course. Susan has a sympathetic boss and secretary at work, at home her ex-husband Doug, a

⁵⁶ It is only by writing this narrative inquiry that I have come to recognise the many and great differences between my own and my sister's experience of our parents and more fundamentally the way in which our sistering relationship was shaped by them. One reading of the story is to focus on our father (the Prologue tale) but there is another reading working in counterpoint and hidden behind the paternal Bluebeard figure; a much more painful reading in its way, which turns on our mother and what can only be described – with a loving sorrowfulness on my part – as a clear dereliction of duty exacerbated by collusive behaviour. It is difficult to avoid the knowledge that by positioning us in the way she did, our mother played a large role in distancing her daughters from each other. It is always more difficult to face the frailties in those we love dearly than those we do not. It is always the deepest and most vital work to bring those spectral figures out of the shadows and turn them towards our gaze.

compassionate man and not one to hold grudges, steps up to the mark and takes on a lot of extra childcare. Peter, Jean's husband, takes over their household and children and does as much as he can to sit with his mother-in-law and play peacemaker in the non-stop run-ins between his father-in-law and daughters. It helps that Jean is on a sabbatical from her job that year although she misses out badly once more on getting a full university experience from her course.⁵⁷

During this period as well they sort out the house. It is difficult to describe the state of decay and disorganisation it has fallen into. At first their father seems almost pathetically grateful, then becomes alarmed when they make it clear that he will have to put his hand into his pocket in order to rectify the mess. As Jean rolls up her physical sleeves and sets to with the disinfectant, so Susan rolls up her sleeves in another way and sets to getting cash out of her notoriously tightfisted father. At this point Walter is still badly frightened. He has had a nasty shock which comes on top of two destructive, mean, angry years with his wife. Even he must have a moment in the dark of the night when his conscience twitches. Thus Susan surmises, because getting him to cough up is nothing like as difficult as she has known it to be in the past. It won't last of course.

⁵⁷ My sister missed out once more on her chance to get a full 'university experience'. She had spent some time negotiating a paid sabbatical year from her teaching job and getting her university fees paid in addition. That she managed to secure this demonstrates the high regard in which she was held and that the LEA felt she was worth this 'investment'. As it turned out she managed to complete the coursework and get a pass but she failed to get the full benefits from her year 'out' because of our circumstances. Yet again I would argue a feminist position that the patterns of gendered care giving in our culture constrains, limits, and determines individual women's professional development and progression. I think most readers will concur with my hypothetical speculation that if my sister had been a brother it is likely that the prioritising between professional advancement and care giving would have been different. But my sister had a gendered subjectivity and so, whilst she did not have the closeness of relationship to our mother as myself, she was sufficiently loving and caring and crucially *gendered* in her response to the situation to sacrifice her professional life at this juncture to her care giving role.

But it is Susan who takes on the mammoth and dispiriting task of getting Social Services aids and help, GP and District Nurse support, Macmillan Sisters are lined up, the Hospice contacted. Jean is brilliant at the household stuff, cleaning for hours, sorting out, her wonderful cooking producing lovely meals for Mum, but she seems reluctant to engage in the 'public' stuff, the dealing with officials and specialists, and particularly with the hospital and doctors. So, again and not for the last time, Susan finds herself taking the lead, the big decisions on which so much depends. She fights the Home Help service, waging a prolonged battle to get a few hours a week from a beleaguered and overstretched service, and having to counter not just an underfunded service but the breathtaking sexism of the female supervisor who tells her that it is a daughter's duty to undertake all the care. Pointing out to her that she is a single parent with a full time job buys a few seconds of silence. Susan uses it to persist, hang on, and in the end gets it. She organises the home aids, the commode, the wheelchair, the bath support, all of which she will end up paying for herself. When she is at work she seems to spend half the morning on the telephone doing battle with one provider after another.

- Doesn't your sister do any of this? asks Mary, her secretary, one day.

It is a week or so after her mother's return home and Susan is juggling a full time job with her kids and now nursing her mother on a scale which is already looking nigh impossible.

Susan looks up in surprise.

- Well, says Mary, never one to mince her words, you tell me you're both sharing the care of your Mum, but it's you I see doing all this running around and organizing. What bit is your sister doing then? Not a lot from where I'm sitting.

A loud sniff of disapproval follows her words, and Susan, too tired, too pre-occupied, too upset, ignores them as she picks up the phone again. Mary doesn't know what she is talking about. She and Jean are pulling together really well as far as she is concerned.

Later that night though, as Susan wearily drops into bed, Mary's words come back to her. She is so busy, so tired, so upset, that she hasn't had any time to process what is going on really and reflection is the last thing she feels like doing, facing just a few hours sleep at best before she starts all over again. But she has to acknowledge that her role as little sister to Jean's unchallengeable big sister role has changed, is shifting in some kind of way, that the overall responsibility for their mother seems to be on her shoulders a lot of the time. She'll think about this later.⁵⁸

The days move into weeks, the four week milestone passes, and Roso is still responding well to her medication. The consultant has explained that the

⁵⁸ Now I can see that this was the point I started to understand that the dynamic of 'big sister -little sister' was fragmenting. I was not able to take this any further at this time and I think I was alone in this knowledge. My sister indicated no sense of sharing this understanding. Mauthner (2002) theorises helpfully here. She points to a 'positioned discourse' where the roles between the sisters are fixed and unchanging and a 'shifting discourse' 'which captures moments in relationships when role reversals occur, illustrating the post structuralist notion of power as fluctuating as well as fixed' (p 62). See also Drewery (2005) who writes about positioning theory as an aid to developing our understanding of how 'different forms of selves-in-relationship' are made.

drugs will give a temporary respite, an appearance of improvement, but it will be illusory and at some point their mother will move into a final decline. Both sisters understand this and are braced for it but for the moment treasure seeing their mother finally tucking into her favourite foods with gusto, speaking clearly, appearing to enjoy some quality of life. Susan gives her mother the little gifts she knows she loves, chocolates, Thorntons toffees, fills the house with flowers, sits with her on the old sofa for hours, her mother always holding her hand, watching the usual daytime television dross. But there comes the time when slowly, imperceptibly, day by day, she deteriorates a little further. The drugs have done what they can and nothing is now going to stop its insidious progress.

Except that Walter will not have this. Whether it is because he allows himself to clutch at temporary straws, or because he puts his faith in his god delivering a miracle, or because he is simply old and unable to take in the limits of the medication, Susan doesn't know. All she knows is that from this time on the nightmare becomes a hell as her father, locked into self pity, his needs increasingly sidelined as his wife becomes more desperately ill, starts to reveal a personality which leaves even his knowing and long suffering daughters aghast with disbelief. Except that Susan, as the daughter with the lifetime role of challenging Walter, begins to struggle under the weight, the destructiveness, of the burden.

I trudge up the hill to the house, my bulging workbag thumping against my leg, a shopping bag and flowers in my other hand. The hill does not get any easier however many times I do it from the bus stop and for the umpteenth time I wish I had the money

to get a car, but getting divorced, moving house, has cleaned me out for the next year or so. At least Sheffield has got a brilliant public transport system. It's just that I would save a lot of time if I could get from work to Mum's by car. As it is, I sometimes miss the bus at one end, or the city centre connection with the other bus, and it's all time I could be spending with Mum. Time running out, how much time left? She's hung on amazingly so far but it's coming, oh please, not for a little while yet, let me have Mum just for a bit longer. Oh god, don't start up here in the street, for god's sake, no free hand to get to my tissue, stop it..

I get to my parents' house and walk into the kitchen. It hits me straight away. It's freezing cold in here. We are well into autumn now and my parents' old fashioned house has no central heating, just two coal fires, one in the kitchen and the other in the sitting room where Mum spends her days. I am instantly furious. I know exactly what the reason is for there being no fire in the kitchen. I go to put the shopping on the draining board and notice how messy it is, piled up with unwashed plates from the previous day, saucepans on the cooker still with the remains of food in them. What's going on? What's Jean been doing? Or not doing more to the point. Furious now with two people I take a few deep breaths before going in to see Mum. I know how short a fuse I'm on these days. I'm so tired I feel lightheaded.

Mum is sitting in her usual place on the sofa and Dad is in the other easy chair reading.

- Ah good, he says looking up briefly, you're here. Susan's here Rose, you can have your lunch now.

I move towards Mum to give her the usual kiss and put the flowers into her restless, plucking hands. And then I stop and stare at her. Mum is still in her nightie, her filthy nightie. Congealed porridge is clearly visible dribbled down the front of it along with tea stains and jam. Her hair is wild, her face crusted with the remains of her food. She's cold, a rug on the stool hasn't been tucked round her.

I whip round to face Dad.

- What's going on? Why is Mum in this state?
- Oh, Jean couldn't get here this morning, he says, casually. Car broke down coming over Ringinglow. Thinks it's the gears. Sounds to me like it might be a bigger problem but she wouldn't be told of course. I've told her about that gearbox before. What I think is...oh..., well, anyway, she

found a phone to let me know, but she said she couldn't get you. Something about you being in a meeting.

It's the casual tone which does it. That, and the interest expressed in the bloody car rather than his dying wife. No hiding my anger now. I round on him, trying not to raise my voice so Mum won't get upset but my tone is venomous and he hears it.

- Right, I say, that explains why she's not here. It doesn't explain why Mum is still in a nightie, a filthy nightie I might point out, at half past one in the afternoon.

- what's yer problem? he says truculently. She's alright. Look at 'er, she's comfortable enough. A bit o' dribbled porridge isn't doing 'er any harm.

- I am looking at her, I hiss, and what I see is someone who has had no care taken of her at all since I walked out of this door yesterday evening. She's dirty, she's undressed, she's cold. It's disgraceful Dad, you should be ashamed of yourself.

He bristles at the criticism. Sullen, mulish, self pity evident in every line of his body, he raises his book.

- Shut up, he snarls, talk to me like that again and you'll know about it. I knew you were coming, so I didn't need to do 'owt. You're the daughter. You'll do it.

I feel sick with rage.

- And you're the husband Dad, I come back at him. Just remind me, what was it you promised in church before your almighty god, mm? Something about to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health? Might have some explaining to do when you get to those pearly gates, eh Dad?

He half rises from his chair, his arm outstretched. I know I am safely out of his reach and I look at Mum pointedly. He thinks better of it and sinks back.

- Just look at her, he says, with a contempt in his voice which is new, 'call her a wife? Yer think I need to be bothered cleaning 'er up, dressing 'er? She don't know any better now'.

And he raises his book once more and turns the page."

⁵⁹ I choose this incident from innumerable others where a similar dynamic played out between us; my father insisting on his patriarchal dominance in an attempt to dictate the terms on which our mother's care would be carried out, and the challenges I consistently made to that world view. At times and without

Not that they are short on sympathy from onlookers and supporters. The GP, having put in a shamefaced appearance on her mother's arrival home, gets increasingly fed up and then angered by the father's maudlin self pity and evident idleness, well to the fore on each successive home visit. Eventually, as the weeks go by and their stricken mother hangs on, the doctor's professionalism slips to the point where he delivers an extensive and forthright opinion to the man about his behaviour and treatment of his wife and daughters. Water off a duck's back. Or as the kindly Home Help puts it a little more pithily,

- As if it isn't 'ard enough for you two girls without that nasty ol' bugger on yer backs.

The sympathetic Home Help manages to wring some more hours out of the supervisor and her quiet housekeeping skills make a real difference to the sisters. A couple of elderly longstanding neighbours pop in and drop off bits of shopping for them. The district nurse is a stalwart, having assessed the situation with the husband shrewdly in the first visit, and visits more than she is scheduled to do. Doug comes up and sits with Rose to relieve Susan and he is good with his ex-mother-in-law. She has always been fond of him. There are however few other people to get involved. Rose and Walter have no friends, never have had any. Other than their church attendance they have had no social life whatsoever, together or separately. Family members are

exaggeration it felt like a life and death struggle. Our mother's life would have slipped away much more quickly if my sister and I had not been vigilant in our care and in my insistence to our father that we expected him to step up to the mark. Although this never happened he knew better than to push it too far – or so I believed at this moment. Finally he was beginning, belatedly, to understand that he was in a relationship of some dependency on us.

now very thin on the ground. Her younger brother, Bill, Susan's favourite uncle, lives nearby and he drops by occasionally but he finds it very difficult. The sisters understand; by an awful stroke of fate, his own adored wife died a few years previously from a brain tumour too. It is too close to home for Bill to deal with. Her parents' social isolation, apparent to Susan from adolescence, is both magnified by the crisis and magnifies in turn the burden on the sisters.⁶⁰

So whilst the help they get is recognized with gratitude by the two of them, it is the sisters who suffer under the burden of their father. And because history and practice determine that Susan has the role of managing her father, then it is she who bears the brunt of his increasing resentment at his own plight. This will eventually erupt into the final crisis of the illness with consequences unimagined, but for the moment he simply will not accept that Rose's brain is deteriorating daily, that her constant restlessness now, her

⁶⁰ My parents were cut off from social interaction with the outside world to a marked degree. For the twenty years I lived at home I never once saw any person come into the house other than certain family relatives and doctors. Some of this can be explained by social customs and conditions prevalent in working class homes in the 1950s and 1960s. There was a time-honoured tradition of 'keeping oneself to oneself', and when one lives in high density housing with shared backyards and privies, one's privacy is guarded. Kynaston (2008; 2009) provides a comprehensive analysis of this period. Most working class homes in our neighbourhood were, like our house, sparsely furnished with the minimum of equipment. What furnishings there were had to be 'looked after' which meant not using them. As a child when calling at another child's house 'to come out and play' we were told to stand and wait at the door and not asked in. We never played *inside* each others' homes even when it was raining ('you're not made of sugar so you won't melt' was my mother's telling line). My parents had no social life together whatsoever other than to attend Elim Church services on Sundays. Of course attendance and practice of such fundamentalist religious beliefs acted to limit the already constricted opportunities for socialising. Dance halls, cinemas, theatres, pubs – all were 'sinful', 'dens of iniquity' and worse. My father may have had the odd acquaintance but if so contact was away from home, and my mother had no personal friend at all apart from a brief period after I had left home when she joined (with much persuasion on my part) the Townswomen's Guild. She made the mistake of bringing her friend home for a cup of tea. My father's strategy at this threat to his dominance was to be so offensive to the poor woman that she broke off the friendship immediately. My mother, completely humiliated, never went back to the Guild and my father effortlessly reasserted his total control over her life. Patriarchy controls women in so many ways.

repetitive questions, can no longer be controlled by her. Except that for all her mother's descent into confusion, she remembers, hangs grimly onto, one piece of knowledge and won't let it go. When Rose was discharged from the hospital the consultant had a kindly chat with her mother.

- You'll be wanting to see me again doctor won't you? asked Rose. You know, see how I'm getting on like.

Susan had looked at her mother sharply. The words sounded innocent, the normal assumption of a woman ignorant of her diagnosis, her fate. But Susan knew her mother thoroughly and there was something else in the tone; the words held - what? A plea, a quiet desperate wish for reassurance?

The consultant didn't miss a beat.

- You have just got there first, he said with a smile. I'm going to have a quick word with your daughter about when it will be best for you to have an appointment for my clinic, OK?

As her mother left the room with the nurse, Susan turned to the consultant.

- She will remember she's got to see you. It's the sort of thing she worries about, not missing appointments.

- I understand. What we'll do is give her an appointment well into the future. Will that be OK with you?

She had appreciated his grace and tact, an experienced man. They had been lucky to get him.

So the appointment is duly made, her mother clutching the appointment card, as they returned home. And Rose has carried on clutching that card. She has it in her handbag, and she keeps it by her at all times. Later on she clutches the bag permanently on her lap, endlessly shuffling through the detritus in it, refusing to relinquish it to Walter, driven to distraction by the constant repetitive rustling sound.

The card, and the appointment, reveals the first open split between the sisters. Jean's view is that her mother clutches the card simply because it has come into her hand and as her brain functions deteriorate, she becomes obsessive about it. It is her bit of security, a familiarity, rather like a baby's comfort blanket. She doesn't think the hospital appointment particularly significant or something they should have to think about. It isn't going to happen anyway.

Susan isn't so sure. She was there when the appointment was made. She had picked up on her mother's words and she has observed her mother's holding on to the card and wonders about it. She also knows that for years now that their mother has been much closer to her, has talked more confidentially to her than to Jean. On a couple of occasions their mother has seemed to hint that she has a clearer grasp of what is happening to her than they all

assume. One day when Susan took her mother to the bathroom Susan had almost lost her grip on Rose lowering her onto the seat.

- Oh whoops Mum, sorry about that. That was a bit rough on your poor old bottom wasn't it?

- Don't worry about it love.

And then *sotto voce*, just caught by Susan as she bent over Rose,

- You maybe won't have to do it for much longer.

It had profoundly shaken and upset Susan at the time. And now as Rose hangs on, the appointment date which seemed well past the point she could reasonably be expected to survive is looming. Against all the odds as well, give her increasing confusion, Rose remembers the date and time of appointment precisely, and repeatedly starts checking with them all if it is the day she has to go back to see the consultant.

As the day draws nearer a new crisis, of management, of understanding, of love, is reached. Openly between Susan and her father, and more subliminally, but no less profound in its implications, between the sisters.

Mum and I are sitting together on the sofa, holding hands as usual. I do this increasingly now as Mum's hands become ever more restless, moving in a never ending groove from smoothing her clothes, rubbing the sofa arm, stirring the contents of her

bag. She does this now, pulling her hand away and withdraws the now crumpled, familiar, and dreaded hospital appointment card.

- Is it today Susan? she inquires. Shall we have to go today? What's the day today? Is it the hospital day? A nice doctor isn't he Susan? Is it today Susan? What's the day today Susan? Is it the hospital day? He'll be very cross if I miss the appointment. What's the day today Susan? Is it the hospital day?

Dad, sitting across the fireplace in his usual easy chair has heard nothing of this. His recent solution to Mum's increasingly confused and repetitive questions is to clamp his Citizen Band radio earphones firmly over his ears and turn up the volume. But he picks up something because he looks up and catches my eye. And I decide there and then that this has got to be dealt with, for all our sakes. I know I've avoided the issue up to now because for the first time I sense Jean isn't with me on this one and Dad will be his usual truculent self. I feel unsure how to go with it but I know now what has to be done.

My intuition tells me that Mum knows something of the nature of her illness. She knows more than she's letting on. I suppose as we think we are protecting her, the truth is that she's also protecting

us. I am the only one to think this but I know now in my heart that I have not got this wrong. I know my Mum better, am closer to her, than either my sister or father. If I'm right then Mum is clinging on to the appointment as a source of hope. She both wants to show her consultant that she's doing well and hear exactly that from his lips too. She is desperate to be given reassurance that her worst fears are groundless.

And so Mum must be allowed to keep the appointment. The question is how to deal with Dad and Jean's objections to this and also how to manage the practicalities. I wait until Jean arrives with Peter and then take my chance.

- Peter, do you mind sitting with Mum for a few minutes?

We need to sort out a couple of things.

He's fine with that and Dad and Jean move with me into the kitchen. We do this often enough for it not to cause comment.

Deep breath. I say it's about Mum's hospital visit. Dad groans and turns to go back into the sitting room but it is Jean who stops him.

- No, come on Dad, she says. We do have to decide about this.

Good. That feels better. I explain my view. I gloss over my certainty of Mum's knowledge of her parlous position and concentrate on making it simple. I know this stands a better chance with Dad, refusing to accept as he does that Mum has any awareness about her condition ; a case of his needing to believe that, I think sourly. And maybe it's not only Dad who needs to believe it. I let that fleeting thought go and concentrate on getting them both on board.

Jean hears me out but I can tell she's troubled. Then she says it.

- But what on earth is the consultant going to think Sue? She's clearly troubled by the question.

- We can't waste his time with a completely useless appointment. We all know he can't actually do anything now for Mum.

- Yes he can, I round on her fiercely, heartsick at what she's just said.

- He can give her some peace of mind. He can give her the reassurance I think she's looking for. If that helps her through these last few..., well, anyway, it's worth it.

- Jean's right, says Dad, as I knew he would. We can't go bothering busy men like him. He's done what he can for yer Mum.

- Look, I say desperately, what if we ring his secretary and explain the situation? At least we can take some advice on this?

Jean is thinking it over and she's still uneasy about it. It strikes me, not for the first time now, how alike she is to Dad in some ways. Both overawed by authority, by status.

- Well, OK, she says slowly. I don't suppose there's much harm in ringing his secretary.

And, avoiding my gaze,

- When you ring her do be honest with her about the stage Mum has got to.

The 'you' is not lost on me.

Dad growls. He doesn't want to know about any of this.

- And what 'appens then if they say yes? he demands truculently. How do you think we're going to get her there?

I look at him in confusion and then the practicalities dawn on me properly. We have an Ambulance Service dispute on in Sheffield and the Service has already given notice that they will be on strike the day of Mum's appointment. I don't have a car. I look at Jean. She looks embarrassed as she says,

- Our car will be off the road that day Sue. Booked in to sort the gears out. Can't alter it, it's taken ages to get the garage to give us this slot. You'll have to think of something else.

The 'you' registers again. For the first time I feel some anger rising and I stifle it. Can't afford to fall out now. Too much at stake.

Dad looks triumphant.

- And yer can forget about mine. I haven't taxed it for these six months, saved a bit o' money that 'as. Well, that's sorted it then, 'asn't it? We can't get her there.

And he turns away to leave the room.

The familiar sickening wave of fury comes now.

- So that's it, is it Dad? Something else you don't have to bother yourself with? Well, if we haven't got a car between us what's wrong with a taxi? Maybe some of that road tax saving could go on getting Mum a taxi, eh Dad, or have you already spent it on yourself as usual?

I know I'm pushing it, hitting him hard with my anger and sarcasm. So does Jean. She gives me a warning look, her face tight with anxiety.

He swings round to face me now and I see the reddened, lowered face, the jutting jaw, the bullish neck. His bulk looms over me. I stand my ground. I have been here too many times before.

But he doesn't raise his fist. Instead, lip curling, contempt he doesn't bother to hide loading his voice, he pushes his words into my face, deliberate, implacable, final.

- I'm not spending money on a taxi for yer mother. I'm not spending another penny on 'er. If you want to get 'er to 'ospital, tek 'er yersen on t' bus.

I stand rooted. I cannot believe it. As much as I know the callousness of my father I am stunned by this. That he means it I am in no doubt. I look at Jean, wildly, for help. She looks stricken and terrified. Then she looks away, shifts her stance.

• I'll go and relieve Peter now, she says, and she's through the door instantly.

In this moment I know that I have finally come face to face with the essence of this man. And I know with certainty that in losing my mother I will gladly lose my father from my life too. For in my soul, to the end of my days, I will never forgive this, never forget.

For the first time in this desperate journey I am on with my sister I feel completely alone."

The transport problem is solved by Bill. He sometimes pops in to see Susan and he arrives at her back door a couple of days after the confrontation with her father.

⁶¹ This moment was a significant if lonely one for me. It marked the point when the 'fused', 'blurred', 'high access' sistering I unthinkingly habituated began to noticeably crack open for me. I had felt the tremors earlier, but now I saw the crack under my feet. Or to problematise it theoretically, how much weight do I give to the role of my agency in determining this sistering relationship? By agency I mean how active I felt myself to be in acting, or deciding to act, in order to bring about some change in our sistering relationship. I think this moment, whilst uncertain and confusing, was when I realised I needed to re-frame my relationship with my sister. Of course, given the circumstances any such project, that is to act decisively, was deferred indefinitely.

- Is that kettle on then lass? he says cheerfully as his head comes round the kitchen door.

- Oh, hello Uncle Bill, good to see you.

Susan gives him a warm kiss and switches on the kettle, put the mugs out.

- How's she doing then love? he says quietly, as he takes a sip of his tea. By 'eck lass what's this you've given me? Call this tea? Are you trying to poison me or summat?

Susan peers into her mug and realises that she has dropped in Earl Grey teabags without thinking. She grins at Bill.

- Just thought I'd educate your palate a bit. You know I like a challenge.

They laugh together, they have always had an easy relationship. Susan has loved her uncle devotedly from the day he came up with the cash to buy her a violin when she was twelve and desperate to learn so that she could play in the school orchestra. Her father of course had refused point blank – 'why should I waste that kind of money on you?' – and her Mum, without any money of her own, had finally approached her brother for help. He had not only come up with the violin purchase but given her a brand new violin case to put it in as well. From that day onwards Bill was Susan's favourite family member and the affection was returned.

Susan looks at Bill and makes a decision.

- She's going downhill quite fast now, but she's still alert enough to remember this hospital appointment. It's caused a real problem.

And Susan finds herself pouring out the whole story. She normally would not say anything to Bill about her father's behaviour. She is still influenced by her mother's stricture about 'not washing dirty linen in public' and she feels as well that such knowledge might put Bill in an awkward position. But she is past caring now, past feeling disloyal, past covering up for her father's mistreatment.

Bill listens in silence, sipping the tea, head bent. He hears her out and there is a short silence. Then he too seems to come to a decision. Putting his mug down with a thump on the kitchen table his head comes up and he looks Susan straight in the face.

- Well, as far as getting yer Mum to t'ospital's concerned Susan, there's no problem. I'll tek 'er. Glad to do it. As far as your Dad's concerned, well...what I'll say is this. I've known about yer Dad's behaviour for a long time, I've got a view about how he's tret my sister down the years and you two girls, well.....you've had a bad time of it.

He stops. And then it comes, forcing its way between tight lips, a choked voice.

- He's a wrong 'un your Dad, Susan. I knew it the minute yer Mum brought 'im 'ome to meet us. He's allus been a wrong 'un.

Susan is never to forget the visit to the hospital. Once more, she is the one to take her mother. Once more Jean makes it clear that she cannot be there. The reason is as ever unchallengeable and Susan knows that there is not any mileage in trying to get Jean to go with her. But she feels extremely nervous about doing it without Jean. Her mother is now so ill. If it wasn't for Bill accompanying them she thinks afterwards, she would have pushed a lot harder. As it is Bill keeps his word and chauffeurs them up to the Hallamshire Hospital, dropping them off in the car park. But that is where he intends to wait. He can't bring himself to go inside the hospital where his beloved Vera died and Susan feels that she can't possibly argue with him. So with a deep breath,

- Come on Mum, out we get. We'll just take it steady.

At first her mother seems to manage the walking quite well. She had got into the car steadily, with support, at home and she gets out of it in an almost sprightly manner. Trying very hard to put on the best possible performance, Susan realises later. Leaning heavily on her daughter, they move very slowly towards the main doors. Susan hasn't registered how far away the car park is, but now she suddenly realises she is in trouble. Her mother, after the initial good start, can hardly keep her legs moving and leans more and more heavily on her daughter. Too far from Bill's car to attract his attention, nowhere near the main doors, Susan looks around in desperation. She spots a

wheelchair abandoned a few yards away. Brilliant. She inches her mother towards it.

- Here we are Mum, she gasps. Let's get you sitting in this and then we can get more of a move on.

- Her mother rears up suddenly, almost toppling them both.

- I'm not getting in that thing, she says with surprising firmness. Oh no, I don't need a wheelchair. What an idea Susan. I'll just take it slowly.

- Oh come on Mum, Susan says aghast, it's no big deal, and it will give me some help.

But it is a big deal of course. Rose, desperate to present the best possible face to the consultant has no intention of giving the game away by arriving in a wheelchair. She will walk into that clinic however long it takes.

No matter Susan's increasingly desperate pleas to get her mother to sit in the chair. Rose will not sit and Susan can't physically make her. And all the while Rose's considerable weight is bearing down more heavily with each passing minute. As luck has it there is no-one around to whom Susan can appeal to for some help. Of course, thinks Susan grimly, if Jean had been able to bring herself to face the hospital she wouldn't be in this pickle now. She is learning a few things about Jean that are new to her. No time for that now. Concentrate on Mum.

Somehow she does it. By the time they reach the clinic Susan is virtually carrying her mother, soaking in sweat, shaking violently, nauseous with exhaustion. It is the most terrible journey of her life.

There is more. Apparently Rose's consultant has not been warned of her attendance. As Susan hauls her mother through the consulting room door she registers the look of absolute shock on the consultant's face. It is gone in a split second. Moving swiftly round the desk he grasps Rose on her other side and seats her. Susan says as quickly, as casually, as she can,

- We rang your secretary the other day to let you know that Mum had remembered her appointment. So here we are.

He picks it up instantly.

- Well, Rose he says, you're looking grand. I can see that you're doing very well.

Her mother beams.

- Oh yes I am doctor, she says, I feel much better from the medicine you've given me. I think I'm on the mend.

- I think you're doing absolutely splendidly, he says. They don't make them like you any more do they?

And he moves smoothly into a thorough medical examination, talking quietly, reassuringly.

- Well, I can't tell you enough how impressed I am with you Rose. Now I'm going to have a quick word with your daughter, and the nurse will find you a wheelchair. I know you're doing great but I can't have you overtaxing yourself.

And with that her mother happily moves off into the waiting room supported by the two nurses who have suddenly materialised.

The consultant looks at Susan for a long moment.

- I don't know what to say, he admits, other than well done. I don't know how you have done it. I have never seen a patient in your mother's grave condition survive this far even when they have refused to let go. What I can tell you is that there is only one reason for it and it has to be the truly wonderful love and care that you are giving her. I am full of admiration for you.

Susan looks at the man with gratitude.

- And you don't know the half of it, she thinks.

Chapter Three On Various Kinds of Spillages and Failing to Mop Up

Winter now, winter everywhere. The moors dusted with their first snow, Mum's garden with hoar-lined tree, shrubs drooping down with ice. I too am drooping, weighed down with ice, frozen heart, stopped veins. Hell isn't fire, it's ice. Ice and tiredness. Tiredness so mind-numbing, never-ending, a tiredness which takes possession against all-craving, begging sleep.

This cannot go on. Nursing Mum through the nights now, we take it in turns. At least that is the theory. But Dad simply can't manage it, and not surprising either. He's seventy eight and worn out too in his own way. Several times now either Jean or I have arrived in the morning to find Dad in bed asleep and Mum in a wet bed. It isn't as though we don't have options. We do because I have seen to that. I contacted the Macmillan nursing team ages ago and they have rung up several times to check on the situation and to offer night nursing support.

We have broached the Night Nurse option with Dad several times but he is at his most difficult, most obnoxious.

- I'm not letting strangers into me house at night, yer can think agin. Wandering round, nosying in drawers, stealing*

whatever they can find. Yer can forget it, both on yer. I'm not 'aving it, and that's final. We'll manage."

It is not as though we have to pay for the service, as I am at pains to point out to Dad, knowing now he will not spend another farthing on his dying wife. And we're not managing, not any more. Jean and I are stretched beyond ourselves as it is, we can't take over Dad's nights on top of our own. But this is of course what Dad wants us to do and thinks if he holds out long enough, leaves Mum in wet beds enough times, we'll do it.

But today is different. Yesterday a car knocked me down in the street with my daughter. It followed a night of nursing Mum, and then a day at work, before I walked down the hill to the bus stop to pick up Emily coming home from a friend's house. I walked straight out into the road with Emily, sleepwalking. We were very lucky. We got bundled off to A & E, checked over and discharged with just a mass of bruises and cuts between us. But I have got the message, and now I am about deliver it to Dad. Whatever the reaction, I shall ring the Macmillan team today and get the Night Nurse in.

⁶² My father's reaction to strangers in the house was I think complex. A combination of Victorian old-fashioned notions of privacy fuelled by a prudishness which bordered on neurotic (this was the man who refused to be observed by us if he was wearing pyjamas) along with an almost 'primitive' superstition of allowing any 'outsider' in. But over and above this was his overwhelming need to stay in control with his authority unchallenged. He had already experienced challenges from the GP, the District Nurse, the Home Help, which every time left him incandescent with fury. Increasingly cornered by our mother's escalating needs he sought to exert his dominion in the one way he had left; over us, his daughters.

I walk with excruciating care into the house, praying that Mum's sight loss will mean she can't see my black and blue face. And it doesn't register, thank god.

Dad however looks at me, and laughs.

- Well, who've you been arguing with?

Ha, bloody ha. He either doesn't grasp what took place or simply doesn't want to know. I can't be bothered to go into it. Jean comes into the kitchen, leaving Peter to sit with Mum. She's heard my voice but stops short at the sight of me.

- Good god, Sue, she cries, whatever's happened? Oh, my god, you look dreadful. Are you alright?

I tell her briefly, and reassure her that we are both OK. She's very upset, shaken at what has happened to me, especially that Emily has been involved. She doesn't need me to point out the obvious to her, so when I say to Dad that we have to talk about the night nursing situation, Jean immediately agrees and with surprising firmness.

Dad's face shuts down. The mulish look is instantly there, the jaw out, the head lowered. Jean and I exchange a weary look, but we are together on this; I sense it strongly. Of course, so does Dad.

We go through the arguments yet again. We point out we can do no more and Dad cannot be left to cope on the other nights. It isn't fair on him; it isn't fair on Mum. We must now start to use the Night Nursing Service.

He is instantly furious.

- I've told yer, I've told yer 'til I'm blue in t'face. I will not have them women in my 'ouse. Poking around, bossing everyone in sight, interfering, meddling women.

I am calm at this moment. My mind is made up.

- I'm afraid you don't have a choice any longer about this Dad. Jean and I are agreed on this.

- Yer'll do as yer told! Yer the daughters, you'll do as yer told!

His temper thoroughly lost now, he raises his voice and Jean instinctively steps smartly back from him.

· No, Dad, I say, mustering all my reserves, it doesn't work like that now.

· By 'eck, it does, he snarls in my face. Yer don't dictate what 'appens in my 'ouse, lass. I do. Allus did, allus will do. Yer'll do as you're told. I'm yer father, yer'll do as I say. I'm yer father, do you 'ear me?

And now I am somewhere else. I have reached my limit. No, am beyond it.

I look at him directly now as I say to him what he has coming, has had coming for a lifetime.

· I know you're my father, and no - one regrets it more than I do.

Then the world explodes. I am off my feet as his blow lifts me and I slam against the kitchen wall before crumpling down onto the floor. I know what is coming now. I instinctively roll into a foetal curl and cover my head with my arms. I can't manoeuvre to get away from him, the space is too small and I am boxed into a corner by him. He has me and he knows it. The kicking starts, aimed with calculated deliberation at my head, his heavy shoes finding their target. I am in trouble, my body is still

traumatised from a car driving into it and I can't protect my head as I need to. I know he isn't going to stop.

But he does. I hear a strangled noise and I uncurl and look up to see what is happening. I can't take it in. Jean is trying to pull Dad off me. She is screaming at him, something I can't hear properly, don't understand, something about knowing something about him, something she'll go to the police about now if he doesn't stop this minute. And he does stop. Instantly. I look up into his face and what I see is a frightened man. I still don't understand what has happened to make him back off but it is clear enough to me that something about Jean's words are powerful enough to control this man, to strike a terror in him now etched on his face.

And then Peter is through the door. He looks aghast, takes it in with a fast appraising glance and acts swiftly. Pulling Jean off Dad, he locks down his father-in-law with an iron grip.

· You bastard, he says tightly. You ever touch Susan or Jean again, and so help me, as old as you are I'll beat the living daylights out of you.

Dad slumps defeated and as Peter lets him go he slinks out of the door, out into the garden. I pull myself up into a chair and dust

myself down. We can hear Mum's voice, a wavering cry from the sitting room. Peter stands looking from Jean to me.

• Go on, I say, go to Mum, we'll sort ourselves out.

I look at Jean. She is ashen and visibly shaking. Then I realise she is shaking not from fear but from rage. She is beside herself with rage, a towering, incandescent rage I cannot remember ever seeing before.

• Stay there Sue, she whispers, I'll get something to wipe you up.

I haven't noticed that I am bleeding.

And as she crouches by me dabbing away she tells me a story.⁶³

⁶³ This was the first and only time my sister defended me from my father. For all of our childhood she had done the opposite, to 'set me up' in a way which invariably delivered me into our father's hands. So her action here was quite breathtaking, incomprehensible to me at the time. Writing it makes me confront it. I have several thoughts. On a practical level Jean needed me. She, like I without her, could not have carried the burden alone. Such were the difficulties of our situation that this required her to override the pattern of a lifetime and intervene on my behalf. No small matter for her given her by now pathological fear and dislike of Walter. My second thought is that in some way the scenario she watched unfurl between myself and our father took her back to the dreadful day by the reservoir; the crumpled body on the ground, the towering figure of Dad smashing down repeatedly on the inert body. This time she was an adult and could act. And in her action, and more so, in her words, she set up a new dynamic which would dictate their relationship until - no, after, my father's death. My final thought is that my sister's words should have been prescient for me too. After all my sister had traded in her lifetime's silence and given to me a vital piece of knowledge which had the potential to transform our sistering. But it came at the wrong moment for me. I was beyond being able to reflect insightfully on anything other than my mother's situation.

Rose dies four weeks later. The Macmillan Night Nursing Service is a godsend, making it possible for the sisters to carry on. Walter does not put up any more fight, objections. He withdraws into his CB radio, his walks, his books, leaving his daughters to manage everything, but leaving them alone finally.

Right at the end their mother is moved back into hospital. Both sisters feel stricken; they feel they are breaking faith with their mother, the faith she has entrusted to them in her last few months. They know they have no choice but it does not make the decision any easier.

Susan looks at Jean. Conscious of having been the one to take her mother on all the trips to the hospital she expects her sister to want to be there on this last journey.

- Shall we go together with Mum Jean? she asks

Jean stays silent.

- Or do you want to go with her by yourself? Susan wonders.

Jean doesn't meet Susan's eyes.

- Actually, she says, actually...I think I'd better pop home to organise a few things. I'll see you later at the hospital.

Taking her mother out of her home for the last time is unbearably hard, one of the hardest things in her life which Susan has to do and she nearly doesn't manage it. But her mother, as though knowing somehow, helps her. As she is taken into the ambulance she comes into her last few minutes of lucidity. Susan will treasure always the memory of those moments, her mother's final gift.

Last Words

You are my joy she said

Confined now to her bed

Leaning over

Make more comfortable

Wipe face

Tenderly comb hair

Rest back on her pillows

You are my joy she said

Her mind now gone

Recognition past recall

Clouded eyes

Suffused with love

Lock into mine

You are my joy she said

Through the confusion

Darkness closing

A

Single

Stunning

Moment

Of recognition

Face upturned to mine

Last words

You are my joy she said⁴

⁴ Written in 1986 after my mother's death

Chapter 4 Distant Lives, Still Voices⁶⁵

After the funeral Jean turns to Susan, and holds her.

- Sue, she says, we must always stick together now, we mustn't let anything come between us, after all we've been through, all we've coped with together.⁶⁶

Susan just nods.

They do what has to be done, their father leaving everything to them. The funeral is organised and got through, the headstone ordered and paid for, the heartbreaking task of sorting out their mother's few clothes, knick-knacks, is dealt with. Suitcases full of rusty food cans are decanted into the bin, and in the bag which her mother had clutched to herself with grim determination, Susan discovers two hundred pounds in premium bonds. They find that their mother has hidden away little caches of pound coins, fifty pence pieces, tangled up in her underwear, shoved inside shoes. It represents the sum total of their mother's wealth, her pathetic bid for a little independence from her tormentor. Scrupulously they split every little find between them, saying nothing to their father. His final acknowledgement of his daughters' part in caring for their mother is to ceremoniously give them each twenty pounds

⁶⁵ The title is a re-jigging of Terence Davies' title for his seminal film of a 1950s working class childhood. I came across it as a sub-heading in Mauthner's excellent book (see Mauthner 2002) which text gave me my starting point for this inquiry and I hope she will forgive me for using the title.

⁶⁶ Whilst being chillingly ironic given future events initiated by my sister this comment also confirms for me the insight gained from therapeutic work which was that my sister's continuing need for me was just as great, if not greater, than my need for her in my childhood. As well, I think it confirms my earlier comment that the idea of 'family' was crucial to my sister and never more so than in the aftermath of our mother's death. Out of the blitzed remains of our family I was the one still left standing for Jean.

'for lookin' after 'er so well'. Undoubtedly in his eyes a staggeringly munificent gesture of generosity.

Susan throws her note on the fire in front of him. Jean keeps hold of hers.⁶⁷

There is not, ever, any discussion about how their mother's illness and death has been for each of them, and not another mention of Jean's shocking story. Susan does try; she makes several abortive attempts to open up this conversation. For her, it feels important to go through this process with Jean, a kind of de-briefing she supposes, and without it she is left with questions, and probably more sadness. But Jean is different. She will not, cannot talk about it. This becomes painfully clear to Susan on the first anniversary of Rose's death.

It is Jean who moots the idea that they should always mark the anniversary of their Mum's death.⁶⁸ She says this at the same time as insisting they must always stick together, and Susan is happy to agree to some kind of act of remembrance.

The day I have been dreading is here. The memories are even sharper, more agonizing than I expected. I wonder rather desperately how long it is going to take me to recover, move forward. I am not sure how I will get through today's grim anniversary day, but I will at least have Jean to share the

⁶⁷ This difference in our responses was something I recalled sharply after my father's death and made a very different meaning of it from the one I made at the time.

⁶⁸ Given what transpired I can only speculate that this suggestion came more out of my sister's need to find something which would bind us together in a permanent way than it was about re-visiting a painful memory.

heartache with me. There will be some easing I think, some slight lessening of the still raw grief.

I load the children into the car after school and set out for the Derbyshire village where Jean lives. The children are subdued but looking forward as well to seeing their cousins, sharing something of this day with them. It will help them too.

But things strike me in an off key as soon as we enter the cottage. Jean is at her busiest, in a non-stop flurry of household jobs, teaching prep, organising Peter and the kids.

- If you want to stay, you're welcome, she says, but as you can see Sue I've got a lot to get through before tomorrow.

I stare at her. I am wrong footed, nonplussed. Have I made a mistake about her intentions for this day? But she knows why we are here, I haven't just turned up out of the blue. Has there been a change of heart? Perhaps she just intends to get the chores done first? I don't know what to think, how to react.

Time passes. I hang about, uncertain, vacillating. Jean snaps orders at her family. The children wisely disappear into their cousin Simon's bedroom and I find myself sitting on my own in the kitchen, a cooling mug of tea in front of me. Both Jean and

Peter are nowhere to be seen and I feel a fool somehow, a spare part, an appendage to their lives. I have either read the script wrongly or it has had a drastic re-draft in my absence.

Bleakly I make up my mind.

- Come on kids, I yell up the stairs. Time for off.*
- You're welcome to stay for supper, Jean suddenly reappears. She looks sheepish.*
- No, we won't thanks, I say briskly, as firmly as I can.*

I avoid eye contact too. I know I should say something but duck it as ever." Just get out of here. I bundle the kids into the car, with whines about no tea emanating from the back seat, shoot down the hill and stop at the chippy on the village high street.

⁶⁹ Power relations between sisters can indeed shift but can also be reasserted within familiar and familial discourses. As Foucault quoted in Danaher et al. (2000) points out, relations of power are not set in stone. It shifts, it is fluid. Long experience had trained me into avoidance of direct challenge or confrontation with my sister, especially when I sensed (as I did on this occasion) her emotional unease and the potential for an unpleasant 'scene'. Mauthner (2002) says 'Power comes alive in enacted practices and experiences' (p 65). So I failed once more to challenge my sister, at least directly. But in truth something did shift between us because I was able to assert my autonomy for myself and children and leave. Unusually for me I took charge of myself in an interaction with my sister and acted decisively. I achieved some power *indirectly*. I offer this as an example of a feminist reading of power, that is, there can be no one definition of power as being possessed by one person over another person, but rather power relations can be both, and sometimes present in a single interaction. The action was not lost on my sister or myself. And the incident also represented something else. Looking back I can mark it as a key turning point in the decline, the increasing *distancing*, of our relationship.

Placated by the rare treat of fish and chips out of a bag, the kids munch as I drive up over the dark moorland.

· Why did we go Mum? Tom asks. I thought you said we were going to do something to remember Grandma?

· Yes, I thought so too love, but it seemed like Jean didn't want to do that after all.⁷⁰

· Well, why didn't you tell her Mum? We've come out all this way, and she didn't even say thank you to us. You never tell Jean Mum, it's always her telling you

A pause, then more mumbles through a mouthful of chips,

· I get really fed up with Jean, I really, really do. I don't know why Peter puts up with her. He should just take Simon and Kate and get another house to live in.

· Yes, agrees Emily in an equally stuffed voice, and then they would be more happier, wouldn't they?

⁷⁰ It has been through the writing of this narrative that I have understood the extent to which my sister, in my view, relied on denial and repression to survive overwhelming emotional pain. As much as I feel this has caused me some distress and a measure of injustice I can feel nothing but sadness for a woman who appears to have made it her lifetime's grim work to build and maintain a defensive fortress on such shaky ground.

The incident marks a shift, a turning point, a turning *back*, after a brief cathartic period. The old patterns, the old rules of engagement between the sisters, reassert themselves. So it is that as both of them move through their forties nothing and everything shifts between them.⁷¹

On the surface their lives and their relationship appear more or less as they have been. But the change which their mother's absence brings alters something fundamental in each sister, begins a splitting, a sliding, an opening up of a chasm between them, and more darkly within each of them. Their mother, who in life seemed so powerless, so weak, truly pathetic, in need of help from her daughters just to get through her life, has exerted a powerful bond, has been the glue which had kept their lives stuck together in some semblance of order and normality. Now without her, and without realisation on their part, a crumbling begins, a slow decade-long disintegration.

The decade of their forties runs, unnervingly similar for both sisters, along parallel but imperceptibly divergent tracks. Both do well in their professional lives moving surely and confidently up their respective ladders. Both are overwhelmingly busy with full working lives, growing children, involvement in the local Labour Party, school governorships, trades union

⁷¹ I want to interrogate here not only the question of power relations between two sisters, the forms that power has taken and how it has shaped our sistering relationship, but as well how each of us have been shaped too, that is, our subjectivities. I take 'subjectivity' to refer to our own sense of our identity, how we each experience our selves, but the crucial question for me is just how much, and in what ways, our own sense of our self is shaped by our sistering experience, and even more, our feelings, our meaning-making, of that sistering experience? See Davies et al. (2002) and Walkerdine (2001) for a discussion of this point. This raises another issue already referred to and that is the matter of agency (see McNay 2000).

activism.⁷² Increasingly they saw each other at constituency branch meetings or women-only workshops rather than one-to-one. And this cross-over contact brings its own problems for both of them. Susan, increasingly confident and the more experienced of the two in public speaking because of her job will be vocal. Jean, less used to large public forums, will stay quiet for much of the time, but squirm painfully watching her younger sister perform. Even now, in her forties, she cannot throw off the feeling that she is responsible in some way for her sister's behaviour, that it reflects on *her*. Dead for a decade, Rose's strictures still ring deafeningly in Jean's ears. Meanwhile Susan, finely attuned to the nuances of Jean's body language in these meetings, alternates between annoyance and gut-rotting shame. *Has she made a fool of herself like Jean so regularly implies?* For both of them there is no escape from their mother's intricately constructed Pandora's box.

Such involvement leaves them less time and energy for their relationship despite Jean's move back into the city less than a mile away from Susan.⁷³

But Jean does continue to make efforts to include Susan and her children in particular celebrations and holidays.⁷⁴ It is the matter of holidays in which

⁷² Miller (1987a) points to something I have long felt, that is that 'political action can be fed by the unconscious rage of children who have been misused, imprisoned, exploited, cramped and drilled. This rage can partially be discharged by fighting 'enemies' without having to give up the idealisation of one's own parents' (p 121). This is not to denigrate the integrity or sincerity of political activists, but my own long experience of involvement with people active in 'left' politics brought me into contact with an awful lot of angry, unhappy and (in my own view) damaged people. I do not absent myself here.

⁷³ Another indication for me of my sister's need to maintain some kind of close connection with me, symbolic rather than material as it turned out, given the decrease in contact over this period. I feel I was increasingly responsible for this developing distance. Unknown to my sister my heart sank on hearing how closely they would be living to me. I was still a long way from having a *conscious* understanding of my need to re-negotiate our sistering relationship; *unconsciously* I acted out this need in the material world.

⁷⁴ Notwithstanding my earlier comment I can recognise with hindsight that even whilst Jean insisted on a close family tie she also regularly used distancing techniques with me during our familial socialising. Her behaviour on the anniversary of our mother's death became the norm. On countless occasions I would turn up at

their developing distance openly manifests itself, Jean pushing energetically, persuasively, every year for a joint vacation in French gites, and Susan with equal persistence, resisting. Truth told, Susan is on a bit of a hook here, her children having rebelled against any future joint holidays following a particular disaster two years after Rose's death.

Arriving home after that particular holiday Tom waited until they had carried all the gear into the house and then looked squarely at his mother.

- I'm not picking a fight Mum, he had said quietly, but I'm just letting you know that I'm not going on holiday with Jean ever again.

- No, piped up Emily loyally, and neither am I. We'd rather just be on our own together. We've talked about it Mum. The holidays would be brilliant if it was just Peter and Simon and Kate, but Jean spoils everything.

So that was that. Both children are adamant and never once waver from their position. Susan completely accepts her children's stand. Ruefully she recognises that they are braver than her. They have found the courage to speak the truth which is more than she has ever managed to do with Jean. So every year Susan, pathetically, invents some limp excuse, some unconvincing

her home on invitation to find myself swiftly 'parked' by Jean, whilst she vanished into her non-stop flurry of busyness. It would often be the last I would see of her. I usually ended up spending the time with my brother-in-law and the children. This makes me realise that there is an omission at the centre of this part of my narrative linked to my sense of my sister's need to 'story' a close sister relationship into her narrative self-and-public 'telling' but which was apparent rather than real. This omission relates in turn to the powerful presence my sister had in the circles in which we both moved and that I was known almost universally as Jean's sister first and foremost and only then as someone in my own right. I struggled with huge frustration and ambivalence concerning this perception whilst at the same time colluding with it.

story, to get them off the hook. In the end Jean stops asking, but regularly alludes to how disappointed she is. The reproaches go on for a very long time.

If their professional and active lives are working well for them the same cannot be said for their emotional lives. Again there is a deeply unnerving parallel between the sisters,⁷⁵ both embarking on a series of relationships throughout their forties, openly in Jean's case and with the seeming acceptance of Peter. Each relationship for them both ends in entirely predictable disaster, until Jean finally pulls back to her husband, home life and solace in a form which only manifests itself to her sister a decade later.

Susan, slower to learn, without a stalwart partner to turn back towards, embarks on a last final destructive affair. In the throes of this self-inflicted angst Susan fails to notice and understand that Jean is undergoing a professional crisis which only resolves itself in a period of long term sick leave and eventual early retirement just before her fiftieth birthday.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ The parallels are unsurprising on one level. Both of us were fortysomething old women, both similarly affected by the political and ideological zeitgeist of the previous two decades with its emphasis on sexual freedoms and a woman's right to claim for herself what men had until recently abrogated to themselves. But there is another reading to be had. Both of us were arguably experiencing some version of a 'mid life crisis', which is about, as much as it is about anything, a crisis of subjectivity. My instinct is that this lay at the heart of our mutual 'crie de coeur' in this decade. Our individual subjectivities, shaped so profoundly for both of us by our sistering relationship now lay beached by our mother's absence. How does one carry on being a 'minimother' when the mother herself is no longer around to substitute for? Why submit to a dominant caretaking sister when a mother's death has finally made you grow up?

⁷⁶ My sister's early retirement was forced by a political campaign by parents at her school against the newly introduced tests for primary schoolchildren. The ineptitude of the Local Authority in dealing with the crisis revealed, in my view, a willingness to sacrifice an experienced and valued Head Teacher in order to save itself from further trouble. My sister was the innocent victim caught up in particularly nasty cross fire and there was nothing she could do in her position to shape the events. For someone who seemingly functioned by feeling in control of life and events at all times such a situation was particularly challenging, and eventually, unbearable. She took long term sick leave, then argued for and received early retirement on the grounds of ill health. This turned out to be a poisoned chalice in that she found herself bound by the retirement rules and could not work as a teacher ever again.

As Jean moves uncertainly into her fifties, bereft of her life's work and *raison d'être*, struggling to re-position herself, devastated by her empty nest as her children leave home for university life, so Susan meets her own watershed. Having finally freed herself from her affair and just past her fiftieth birthday, a major depressive illness sweeps her into her own period of long term sick leave. It too coincides with an empty nest, her children having also gone off to university. But for Susan this proves to be her turning point. She will say in future years to anyone who asks her about her breakdown that it was the best break that she ever got. It is only the truth. It saves her life.⁷⁷

So as the decade turns and both sisters move into their fifties life is hard for each of them. And it is an indication of how far they have moved apart that each of them solves their life crisis in quite different ways and without letting each other know anything of it. But a further life crisis is about to consume an unknowing Susan, and it is this event which dredges to the surface the deepest malignancy, the darkest shadows, laid down in their shared and buried childhood.

⁷⁷ Jungian therapy over seven years enabled me to begin the process of individuation as Jung calls it as well as to confront and work through much of my childhood experiences. I agree wholeheartedly with Miller (1987a): 'experience has taught us that we have only one enduring weapon in our struggle against mental illness; the emotional discovery of the truth about the unique history of our childhood' (p 1). Individuation refers to the process of psychological integration which leads to the development of the individual personality. It is seen, and experienced, as a process of transformation where the personal and collective unconscious is brought into consciousness to be assimilated into the personality. It is regarded as a natural process which leads to maturation and has a holistic healing effect on the individual. For a Jungian perspective see Jung (1954), Jung (1967), Jung (1971) and Jung (1989).

Tom walks through the door and gives me his usual bear hug. Dropping a huge rucksack in the middle of the floor, he looks around, interested.

- You've got it looking really nice Mum, it's very 'you'. It's really changed since I painted the walls for you.

Indeed it has. Part of my recovery from depression has been to grasp a painful nettle and move house. This is the first time Tom has been home since he came over for a weekend and helped me slap emulsion on the walls. Now he's back for Easter and I'm delighted to have him to myself for a while. We settle in, have supper, talk flows about his course, his photography project, his girlfriend. Then he goes suddenly quiet, reaches for another can of lager. Downing them too fast, I note disapprovingly.

He looks up and seeks my eyes. Suddenly my heart stops. Something is coming.

- I've got a bit of a health mystery, he says too casually. I wait, not breathing.

- I've got this funny lump on my arm. He rolls up his sleeve, shows me.

I've never seen anything like it before. Hard, shiny, red, odd little granules. It looks sore, and there's a stitch there.

· I went to the GP and he referred me to the consultant, and they've done lots of tests, biopsy, and they think it's some sort of lymphoma.

It all comes in a huge rush, as he gallops his way through this speech. I carry on looking at him. I'm frozen, rooted. It is only when he laughs like he always does when he's frightened and trying not to show it, and he reaches out to me and says, sorry, sorry, sorry, don't mean to laugh, oh god I knew this would be the worst thing, far worse than having the bloody thing...

And I gather him in my arms, hold him fiercely as though he is a small child and not a six foot five man, my small boy, my only boy, and I know the worst has just happened.

Except that it has not. Sometimes the sky falls in and then gets put back up again. Ten long years later we know it's OK." But those first days, months were bad.

¹⁸ It took three years to get a diagnosis of an extremely rare, thankfully low-grade, non-progressing lymphoma, followed by six years of radiotherapy and a final year of a new, radical treatment before Tom was pronounced completely free of it.

Tom makes it clear that his preferred way of dealing with it is to minimise it - 'a little local difficulty' he quips - and his priority is to get his degree.

• The only way I can do this, Mum, is to blank it until after finals. Will you come with me for the consultant's appointment? And then you can talk to him and find out everything you can, but just let me get through this term, get my finals done...

He is brave and sensible and extraordinary.

I do as he asks. Whilst he throws himself into his finals I talk to his consultant and research, trawling the web for hours at a time, read through impenetrable medical articles. I begin to learn, to get some grasp of the issues, but nothing helps to take away the terror, the sickening fear. It is almost impossible to contain. Good friends help greatly, I am blessed with my friends. But not with my sister. In her own terror and fear which is manifest and genuine she copes in the only way she knows how. Every day she is on the phone.

• Listen to this, she says. This is what it says about lymphomas. So what you must do Sue is ring up this person and ..

On and on this goes. In vain I say what I am doing. It is not enough. In vain I tell her that I'm doing it Tom's way. It is wrong. There is only one way to handle this and it is her way. She cannot hear me.

- I don't think you're that bothered about Tom really Sue. You wouldn't be talking like this if you were. I've always thought you were a lousy mother...*

I bat it away. I have other priorities, the chief of which is protecting Tom.

- I'm going to ring Tom up, Jean announces one day. I've got all this information and you won't tell him so I'll have to.*

- You'll do no such thing, I speak sharply, fearfully. I've told you several times now how Tom wants to play this for the moment. He's made it quite clear that he doesn't want any discussion about it 'til he's through his finals.*

- Well, I don't agree with that Sue, Jean pronounces definitely, so I shall ring him now. Anyway, I need to talk to him, for me. I need to hear he's OK.*

I am deadly calm, but the ice in my heart pours into my voice.

- This isn't about what you agree or disagree with. This isn't about you at all. It's about Tom. I insist that you respect Tom's wishes. Jean, do you hear me?

The phone is disconnected abruptly. A few minutes later it rings again. Jean, with triumph in her voice.

- Well I've just spoken to Tom and he was absolutely fine about it. We've had a very good chat about it all.

It is my turn to put the phone down sharply. I ring Tom fearing the worst, dreading what I will hear. Tom's distress engulfs me down the line.

- Oh Mum, why did you let her ring me?

I say what I can to calm him, reassure him it will never happen again. With rage in my heart I punch in my sister's number. It's her I want to punch. For the first time in my life I give Jean a dressing down neither of us will forget. I have never spoken to her like this, my turn now to lay down the law. 'You will not', 'Do

you understand?', 'I hope I'm making myself clear?', 'I am only going to say this once'."

We have no contact for many weeks. It is the longest time in my life up to this point when I hear nothing from my sister. I feel relief, such relief.

And Tom, my wondrous, amazing, sweetheart Tom, walks away from his finals with first class honours, a distinction in his professional exams and the National Best Photography Student of the Year prize.

I want to ring Jean up and shout 'Ya boo sucks to you' down the phone. I want to go round and stick two fingers up to her. I want to dance in front of her with my thumb on my nose. I do none of this of course. I stay resolutely silent.

It is an open turning point in their sisterhood.

Jean writes a letter eventually, along the lines of reproach and expressing a desire for a more equal relationship.⁸⁰ It is time they sorted out their

⁷⁹ It is of course not coincidental that it was because of my overwhelming maternal need to defend my son that I finally manage to find the courage to confront my sister and in so doing break abruptly and definitively with the positioned 'looked after little sister' role.

⁸⁰ It is clear that the message I sent to my sister was correctly interpreted by her. And it seems that she tried to reciprocate. I interpret this as an equally heartfelt desire on the part of my sister to shift our positioned sistering roles into something else. Her expressed desire for 'a more equal relationship' indicated how fed up she had become of the minimother role and her wish to wave goodbye to baby sister.

relationship the letter says. She is tired, she asserts startlingly, of being the big sister. Susan is both astonished and elated by this and takes the letter to share with her psychotherapist.

- Go carefully Sue, Beth advises. You have done a lot of work on these issues but as far as we know Jean hasn't.

But her therapist's wise and cautious response falls on deaf ears. All Susan can hear is that Jean finally seems to be open to some real communication between them. Now, at last she feels, they can deal with the root cause of Susan's feelings towards Jean, Jean's feelings towards Susan. They can talk about their childhood. Susan's reply is to address precisely those issues. Jean's subsequent response professes not to have any knowledge as to what Susan is referring. She had a happy childhood and is sorry to hear Sue didn't.⁸¹ However, she does not ever intend to discuss her childhood with Sue and as long as Sue agrees to these terms she was happy to continue a relationship.⁸²

However, I theorise that although she was clear in her desire to relinquish the 'big sister' role, she was quite unable to contemplate giving up the dominant *power relationship* integral to it. I do not think this was thought through or acknowledged, much less understood by my sister. I would suggest rather that her deeply traumatised defensive coping behaviours *required* her, in the absence of any therapeutic support, to maintain this aspect of our relationship. To put it another way I suggest that she desired to give up the *responsibilities* attached to the 'big sister' role but not the *rights*. And for as long as she maintained this position we were not going to go forward in our sistering relationship.

⁸¹ Miller (1987a) says 'the emotional world of a tormented child is itself the result of a selective process that has eliminated the most important elements' (p 21).

⁸² A key factor in all relationships which undergo a fundamental change is a shift in feelings, and more crucial still, an awareness about those shifts. Reflexivity can lead to new understandings, insights, which once perceived, can enable the individual to transcend existing relations and reach an accommodation of differences hitherto unaddressed. However, for such an accommodation to be reached between myself and my sister, reflexivity had to be present for both of us. For further discussion of narratives of change see Mathias (1992) and Sandmaier (1995).

Susan is bitterly disappointed. She is also gobsmacked.

Jean's denial of their shared history is astounding. She can't count the times when they have sat up over a bottle of wine and reminisced about their Dad's awfulness, their Mum's sad life, the ghastly non-speaking periods. But she also immediately understands her mistake. Beth was right. She has been working in therapy now for some time. She has started on a painful but enlightening journey where she is gaining some insight into herself and family behaviours. Not only is she learning a lot but she is willing to put herself through a fair amount of work and grief to carry on learning. She knows she has only just begun this journey. But Jean understandably has not taken this into account. More importantly Jean has not chosen this path for herself. She has not done any therapeutic work of any kind. Unsurprisingly now to Susan, she is dismissive of it.

Susan writes back briefly, assuring Jean that she will respect her wishes where at all possible, acknowledging of course that the subject of their childhood isn't entirely avoidable.⁸¹ A deafening silence ensues. Eventually Peter rings. Is Sue still intending to spend two weeks in France with them in August as planned? Is she still intending to bring her friend? Can there be some mending of bridges perhaps? Susan has assumed that the holiday – yes, she has finally caved in to Jean's pleas many months previously – is off. She

⁸¹ How crucial this response turned out to be was only revealed with hindsight. My understanding of my sister now leads me to speculate that only with total compliance on the matter of our childhood, that is, guaranteed *silence* on the subject from me, did she feel safe enough to continue in some version of a sistering relationship. So whilst I thought my reply to her was conciliatory and respectful of her wishes whilst being realistic (and privately resigned to the knowledge that I was never going to get her to talk), for her it represented less than the complete obedience she required in order to feel secure and thus I posed an overwhelming psychic threat.

doesn't see how it can possibly work given the situation. But Jean comes on the phone, contrite, apologetic, pleading with her to keep the arrangement.

- It's all forgotten, Sue, all under the bridge. Do say you'll come.

And with the gravest of misgivings it is agreed.⁸⁴

Many years later Susan will reflect that these years were the real tragedy, the real failure. Despite the powerful bond forged in the furnace of their mother's dying, their separate histories and early traumas prove too overwhelming. Somehow their mother's death has set them both spiralling downwards towards destruction. Whilst their mother was alive it was as though a half-destroyed, disintegrating gate had still held up to the elements despite everything, had held on, kept the gap closed, kept at bay the darkness gathering on the other side. Once fallen, the darkness glides in, slowly, undetected, inexorably, and takes possession. The sisters are powerless to prevent it. Unable to free themselves from the reach of their shared childhood, they lose their chance to transcend that narrative and story a different one together.

This is the time when the sisters lose their way back to each other. One sister will also lose the way back to herself, and one sister will find her own path

⁸⁴ Misgivings on both our parts I am certain. We were both extremely nervous of encountering each other again, as evidenced in my conversation with Alex on the train going to meet her and her absence (and silence) on our arrival. The question hangs; why did she make the effort to persuade me to go and why did I agree? I am still uncertain in my understanding of this, but my gut feeling is that it was a last, residual loyalty to our mother, to a lifetime's habit of being sisters 'for her' as well as for ourselves, some lingering nostalgia about the importance of 'family' (although this was always a stronger motivating factor in my sister's life than mine), a hope, against all odds, that we would find a way to re-negotiate a more reciprocal sistering.

on which to travel. But that lies in the future. Here, however, is where the seeds are sown.

Chapter Five Madame Sabatier Reads a Diary

We travel south, the TGV sliding us through rural France, hot sun slanting, burning through fields of upturned sunflower heads. Our lunch is scattered across the table. Baguette, plump black olives, oozing slice of Brie, white peaches, the deliciousness of which seems only possible in la belle France.

We both sigh and simultaneously sink back into our seats. We look at each other across the gourmet crumbs. The holiday starts here and we are both grateful for it, two weeks to jump off the hamster wheel of work. But yet we are unrelaxed still, slightly on edge. Not with each other, no, we as ever seem to have dropped effortlessly into our usual harmonious ease with each other. Working together, spending time at each other's homes despite living two hundred and fifty miles apart, we are used to holidaying together. We have an empathic and joyous relationship, one which we both think of as a sistering one."

⁴⁵ There is an interesting conundrum at the heart of this notion relating to the contradictions between the political and literary discourses of 'sisters' and the lived experience of sistering for so many women. Feminist theory from the 1970s and beyond has regarded the term 'sister' as containing certain characteristics such as solidarity, reciprocity, equality, sharing, togetherness. Such characteristics are imputed to the biological sister relationship, and yet research and talk amongst women who are sisters along with a considerable body of literature focused on sisterhood and my own experience tells me that this is far from being the case. The central issue of power relations, so integral to psycho-biological sistering, is much less an issue, if there at all, in political or friendship sistering. Perhaps the key to this lies with the notion of expectations and also of choice. Sistering friends get to choose each other.

I think now how ever present Alex has been to me recently, so steadfast in her support. During the nine months or so of deep depression which overtook me last year she rang me every single evening. Never missed a one. And when Tom dropped his bombshell she dropped everything and came up to spend a weekend with me, spent hours going through all the research I had come up with, checking through all the options, the possible outcomes. Talking sense calmly, holding me firmly, easing the terror.

· You're the sister I never had, says Alex, an only child.

· You're the sister I wish I had, says I."

And here we are going towards my other sister, my flesh and blood sister, which accounts for our air of slight tension as we sit and survey the last bit of cheese.

· What I do know Alex, I say, meticulously slicing the Brie in two, is that this will be make or break time for me and Jean.

I am not sure what I mean by this. The words force their way out of my mouth by their own volition," but once spoken, they hang

⁶⁰ Women friends may become substitutes for a sister relationship (notwithstanding the contradictions inherent to the role as outlined above), and the strength of this tie will be socially constructed rather than biologically based (see Giallombardo 1966).

between us and cause Alex to frown apprehensively. She has of course the full facts of what has passed between Jean and me, both in recent months as well as historically. She has voiced her doubts but in the end has been prepared to give it a go. She loves France, she's desperate for some sun and she has met both Jean and Peter, spending last Christmas day with them as my family's guest. She has found them welcoming, friendly, accepting of her as my friend, impressed by their considerable social skills in laying on a family Christmas, a superb meal.

A little dazzled by the pretty stone Derbyshire cottage, the traditional village setting, the warmed punch which greets our arrival through to the good port and log fire, a perfect Christmas card day, perfectly delivered. She feels she can hack it, whatever may come up between myself and Jean, she has more than enough social skills herself to ride out any uncomfortableness.

I look out of the window, stare at the acres of vines flashing past, and resolve to make the effort to mend fences with Jean. It will really help of course if she can bring herself to talk about things but I'm not holding my breath. I'll let her set the parameters I think, I won't tread where she puts up keep off notices, but I will

⁸⁷ I am giving voice here both to my uncertainty about my reasons for embarking on a potentially fraught experience with my sister and my intuitive knowledge that this was probably the last opportunity to re-negotiate a sistering relationship and the outcome was unknowable. Through my therapeutic work with a Jungian analyst I had started to recognise and listen closely to this 'intuitive knowledge' and was discovering the power and accuracy of it.

be true to myself. Having spent years colluding with a distorted version of myself around Jean I have done just enough therapy with Beth to have an idea how this, how she, plays with my sense of myself. I am not a long distance traveller yet on this road, but I know I've made a good start and I am slowly beginning to feel I know myself a little better, much more centred, certainly more stable. If Jean is unable to accept the way in which the journey is changing me, then so be it." Learning a simple meditation routine has helped enormously and I feel reassured by this thought. I have somewhere to go where Jean can't follow if it all becomes too much.

So, arriving in S..., alighting onto the platform, I look around with some eagerness, with a sense of anticipation, of my sister. With a prescient sense of sudden foreboding I see Peter step forward. He is on his own. He greets us warmly enough but I know Peter well. I immediately pick up something, a slight sense of frazzle, a little too bright bonhomie. There is an underlying anxiousness which he can't quite disguise from me.

• Where's Jean? I inquire. Waiting in the car?

⁴⁴ I would suggest that my own sense of 'subjective agency' was already strongly developing through my therapeutic work and this had profound implications as a site for the transformation of power relations with my sister. Much of what followed in the subsequent week was a working through of my sister's growing sense of my autonomous agency developing independently of our sistering relationship. My sense of myself was no longer predicated on the identity which my sister had consistently mirrored back to me. I would further suggest that whilst she was unable to access any insight or understanding of this shift in me she felt increasingly threatened and destabilised by it. I was becoming unknowable to her and thus by extension uncontrollable.

· No, at home. Tweaking the supper. I said I'd come for you.
Good journey Alex?

Something's not quite right. It isn't like Jean not to meet people at the station. And tweaking a supper is not something my highly organised and formidably good cook of a sister ever has to do.

On the short journey to their village Alex glances at me appraisingly. She is as tuned into me as I am to Peter. I give a slight shrug, a 'not sure' look, and we pull up outside a funny, higgledy cottage, partly built into an ancient town wall. Exclaiming delightedly, chattering our way into the house, I stop in the hallway, not sure where to go, but struck as well by...what? It is the silence. No Jean emerges to greet us, there is no sound from the kitchen. Peter pushes past me calling out, we're here, we've arrived. The silence continues. There isn't any movement. Peter looks uneasy, covers it with well practised host manners, and moves off into the kitchen having directed us to the sitting room. As we explore the room, the time lengthens. Alex and I exchange puzzled looks. Peter suddenly emerges with a bottle of wine and glasses, and starts to pour.

· She's coming, he says, just got her nose in the oven.

I look at him sharply. He looks away quickly, smoothly starts up a conversation with Alex.

We are half way down our first glasses before Jean comes in. As I get up to move towards her, to give her a kiss and hug, I register somewhere that she doesn't look quite right. I can't put my finger on it. Her face is very red, but of course she has been cooking. She's put on a lot more weight, seems a bit, well, puffed up somehow. Her manner is surprisingly awkward for her. Her usual command of the social graces seems to have deserted her. I decide it's because she's embarrassed about our recent exchanges and exert myself to get past it. But she doesn't give me the chance. She's turning on her heel, heading back to the kitchen, exhorting us to go and sit at the table on the terrace.

• I'll give you a hand with the dishes Jean, I call out.

• No, interjects Peter, you two go and sit out on the terrace.

I'll see to it. Said too firmly, no brooking of argument.

Alex and I silently move out onto the terrace and subside into chairs.

· What's going on? Alex hisses. I am right, aren't I?
Something's going on.

· Yes, you're right. But search me what it is. I can't make it out. Jean doesn't seem to be her usual self, but she was so clear about wanting us here. I don't understand it.

Jean and Peter arrive with dishes, plates, a wonderful meal. The wine flows, things loosen up, a sense of relief palpates around the table. Alex and Jean are drinking far more than Peter and myself. I'm conscious of the way alcohol can fuel tensions when Jean is around so I start as I mean to carry on. The conversation flows with the wine. I realise I am waiting. There is always a point where Jean tells a story, or maybe two or more, about us to whichever of my friends she is with. She never fails to do this on meeting a friend of mine. Sooner or later she will launch into it, most usually the story of my birth. I can just about set my watch by it. The image of a tom cat spraying its territory comes unbidden into my head. Yes, here it comes. Leaning back, face flushed, animated, she waves her wine glass vaguely in my direction.

· I bet Sue hasn't ever told you how we were first introduced
Alex?

A smiling shake of the head and the tale is narrated once again. But this time I stop listening to the words, to the effect the story is having on the listener, and I hear properly for the first time the person telling the tale. And what I hear is grief and rage and wholly unprocessed anguish. I hear a very small child howling with disbelief and pain. As I watch she becomes the small child, the little girl of fifty years before. The story is being told by that infant, not the grown woman sitting there across the table gulping wine. Here is a revelation. She is the small child still, is all I can think as the story winds down. I have just understood something crucial about Jean, and me. This story isn't just a tale, an amusing anecdote to trot out to my friends. This is a primal wounding, a massive wrong which she is living again and again, a wrong which is never righted, which I never put right.

I venture a small experiment. Usually I make no comment at the telling of this tale. My role is to just laugh along, indicate by an expressive shrug, a rolling of eyes heavenwards, an unspoken acceptance of my iniquitous role in the sorry story. This time I laugh as usual when Jean ends but then I sigh casually, reach my hand out for the salad bowl.

Laughing I say,

· Yes, thanks Dad, not even a day old and my cards marked for life with big sis.

Jean's head comes up fiercely. She stares uncomprehendingly at me over the table for a long minute. Peter changes the conversation."

Later, sitting up in my makeshift bed in the sitting room I pick up my journal to write, as is my habit. I don't write any of my thoughts about what has happened this evening. It's too close, I'm still processing what I think and feel. I write about other things and then look around to put it down. Awkward not having my own space. I am conscious of the need not to display my journal too openly, childhood experience being far too engrained for me to think about it, it is merely a reflex. Inside my luggage bag is an obvious no go. In the end I stack up a pile of books, mine and Jean's by the sofa, as though there for me to work my way through and I put my journal towards the bottom of the pile. It looks like just another book. Satisfied, I switch off the lamp and settle to sleep.

⁸⁹ I theorise here that this story was crucial to my sister's projections on to me. I suggest that at one level my sister was troubled by the power of her hostility towards me. One way of dealing with this concern was to build up a watertight case against me which served to justify her animosity. My attempt here was to try to penetrate this defence by putting the blame where it belonged, that is, onto my father's behaviour and away from my hours' old innocent existence. But it was also an expression of my changing subjectivity as well. Miller (1987a) points out that one of the turning points in therapy is when we recognise our 'false self' which has been demanded of us and after the grief and pain which accompany this recognition comes a new authority, 'a new empathy with her own fate, born out of mourning. Now [she] does not make light of manifestations of her self anymore, does not so often laugh or jeer at them' (p 17).

We wake to Jean's plans for the day. A scorcher, she announces. Let's go to the farmer's market in the next town and then move on to a nearby lake for a picnic lunch. It's a good plan we're happy to go with.

- We'll need to set up a kitty for shared housekeeping expenses, she briskly states, and we duly pool our finances.

She still seems rather distant this morning, but not in a way I can easily interpret. She keeps me at arms' length, busying with food lists and shopping bags, bathing towels, flip flops, sun cream. I am used to this activity around her and fall into line as does Alex, following my lead. We pile into their car, and shopping bags overflowing with delicious goodies and cheap wine in plastic bottles, we set up camp at a glorious lakeside beach, the kind the French do so well.

- Heavens, purrs Alex, busy with the sun cream. Oh bliss, oh my.

I couldn't put it better. And for a few hours it seems we are a wonderfully relaxed, peaceful, harmonious little group. We eat and drink, we talk about this and that, we pick up each other's books and start reading them, we wander down to the lakeside edge, paddle through the shallow ripples, press forward until we

feel ourselves float, turn turtle on our backs, drift past each other. It is a perfect afternoon.

The sky eventually starts to cloud over, a little darkening begins.

• O • oh, Jean says squinting up at the sky, this is what can happen here in the late afternoon. Better start getting packed up. There may be rain on the way.

Alex and I heave ourselves from the lake and walk back up to our spot. We are laughing as we come back and my arm goes around Alex's shoulder in an affectionate squeeze. We pick up our towels to dry ourselves off, dress ourselves discreetly under them. As ever, I manage it badly. I have always been hopeless at this manoeuvre, always in awe of those who seem to accomplish it casually with grace and without revealing a centimetre of flesh. I get into my usual tangle.

• Oh my god, Alex shouts in mirth, what do you think you're doing Sue? Just look at you. I can't believe anyone could be so cackhanded. Oh come here for heaven's sake before you get us all thrown off the beach.

I stagger over to Alex, trip up over the trailing bath towel, and collapse in a heap at her feet fighting desperately to keep myself

covered. The ridiculousness of it overcomes us and as Alex tries to get me to my feet, and I try to hang on to my towel, we are both suddenly totally helpless with hilarity. We rock with laughter.

Peter guffaws:

- Christ, what a pair!

And then an icy voice hissing,

- For god's sake you two, people are looking...

Alex and I both look up at the same time and Jean glowers over us. Her face is twisted with distaste, with fury, and something else. I can't at this moment know, only that it is naked, raw, only a fleeting millisecond and then it's gone, but quite unmissable, unmistakable.

The sky darkens, and a black cloud passes over the sun and over my heart. As I hold Jean in my gaze I feel a tremor of fear. I have seen that face many times before, and I give an involuntary shiver. The world has suddenly gone very cold. I glance at Alex and she meets my questioning look. Yes, her too. She has seen it and felt the same.

We drive back to the cottage, Alex and I in subdued mood. Peter drives, making occasional glances at Jean's stony profile who sits silently beside him. Yes, I sigh inwardly, we all have cause to be apprehensive now, not just Peter. I don't know what has created this mood swing in Jean, maybe Peter does? But whatever its cause the dynamics shift significantly, and for the worse, between us.

I take a deep breath mentally and hold myself steady. This will be a test of my newfound stability, my chance to discover if I can handle Jean, and myself with Jean, any better than before. The minute we arrive home Jean disappears into their room closing the door pointedly behind her. Peter looks even more nervous than before. I swing into action.

• OK, folks, let's get this meal started. Come on Peter, show me where the good knives are. I bet you've got a great selection of Sabatiers tucked away, n'est ce pas? Oh, wrong. You've got them here on your worktop. Should have known.

And prattling on, pulling out dishes, saucepans, vegetables, we move through the moment together, chopping, stirring, joshing, sipping, a united little band, putting together a good meal, a good defence.

• Supper's ready Jean, I sing out.

• It's OK, I'll get her, mutters Peter and shoots into the bedroom.

It takes a few minutes for Jean to emerge onto the terrace and sit down at the table. Alex and I both monitor her carefully, the difference being that I know just what to look for. She doesn't look right despite the smile, the friendly manner. She doesn't look quite, well...she looks sort of a bit fuzzy, but I can't put my finger on it. I can feel Alex's relief come through her body sitting next to me. She thinks it's alright and she exerts herself to reciprocate with Jean, chatting away, drawing her into conversation. We move on to yet another bottle of wine and to a discussion of politics.

• And what do you think Sue? Jean says softly.

Ah. Here comes the test.

I put forward my view in as calm and pleasant a tone as I can find. Jean leans forward. Her voice is silky, a voice I recognise instantly as dangerous.

· That isn't what you used to say Sue. If I remember rightly you used to say something very different. Not very consistent are you?

I keep a calm, level voice.

· I did used to think differently about it. Well remembered. But as you can see I've changed my view. Life moves on and we move with it.

Her eyes narrow, regarding, thoughtful. Suddenly she swings round to Alex.

· Well, what do you think of Sue's change of heart Alex? Don't you find it a bit disconcerting, your friend switching positions like this?

Alex is up to Jean's game. She laughs, reaches out to lightly touch my arm.

· Oh I wouldn't find Sue half as interesting a friend if she stayed in the same tramlines all the time. That's what makes her such fun. You never know what she's going to come out with next!

Peter laughs and changes the subject. Jean sits back and looks at us both. She's working out the next move.

The pattern is set for the next few days. Jean keeps on throwing out a challenge to me and I equally consistently decline to pick it up. She can't understand it. I have always bitten back before, she has always managed, however long it took, to bait me, set me up for a sting. I feel I am doing awfully well at this game and tell myself I'm getting too smug by half. But the truth is that for me it isn't a game. My life shift has meant that I genuinely don't care about Jean scoring points off me any longer. My shrug of the shoulders is not an act. That's why I manage to maintain my stance, why she can't find the chink I know she's looking for. I have changed, and Jean is beginning to understand that. And it is rattling her. I know now, at this point in the holiday, that the hoped for sisterly détente is not on the cards. And I am increasingly curious and stumped about Jean's expressed wish to have us visit, given her distancing, and subsequent subtle antagonism. What's in it for her is the question I keep on coming back to.⁸⁰ And what is it about her that just doesn't seem right, doesn't add up? There is something quite odd about my sister,

⁸⁰ It is with hindsight that I can see my sister must have felt fairly quickly after our arrival that a re-negotiation of our relationship was not going to happen for her, or at least, not in the way she was able to do it. I do not suggest that she was this clear in her own thinking or motives at the time any more than I was. My feeling is that she was increasingly being overwhelmed by fear, hostility, projection, as the week wore on, as she failed to find her familiar dominant position with me, as she observed with increasing pain and resentment my strong friendship with Alex at close quarters. Her grip on reality wavered as the level in the glass went down.

her behaviour, body language, which throws me. I can't recognise it, place it, and it's deeply troubling.

It surfaces during an early morning visit to the market. The night before Jean announces that we need more provisions and the kitty is again empty. I understand that dining and wining at Jean's lavish level does not come cheap and I have come braced for the expense. Not so Alex, who deserved to have been forewarned about this but it wasn't something I thought about before we came. Alex is getting slightly worried about the inroads which the kitty's ceaseless demands are having on her funds. It's not that she doesn't enjoy the lifestyle, and has come of course prepared to pay her share, but she feels that she has no say, as indeed she doesn't, in the level of spending which goes on. She is simply directed to cough up for meals which Jean has planned and shops for accordingly. I feel rather guilty about the impact of this on Alex and write about it in my journal that night. But for the moment the kitty purse is full and I volunteer to go with Jean the next morning.

. We'll have to go early Sue, she warns. It'll mean a quick start, otherwise all the good produce will be picked over.

She doesn't seem all that pleased at the thought of having my company but I don't want her to be left with the task of doing it

all. As well, it might give me a chance to be with Jean on our own. It hasn't happened so far this holiday and a bit of me still hopes for a small breakthrough.

We set off early in the morning in Jean's car. She is driving erratically I notice. I'm not particularly alarmed; it's too early for any traffic to be about and the country lanes are generally very quiet anyway. I put it down to tiredness. Conversation in the car lags. Jean is not being communicative but I persist, albeit with inconsequential topics. It is when we arrive and park the car that I start to worry. Jean struggles to get the car into a perfectly easy parking space. She is flustered. It is when she finally abandons the struggle and steps out of the car that I am suddenly arrested by the sight of her. It's as though I have just seen her for the first time again. She charges off without a backward glance, body thrust forward, moving too fast in an already oppressive heat. She seems to have developed a lurching gait I notice. I call out to her, hang on Jean, let me catch up, and she whips round. Her face is bright red, flushed, and as I get close to her I see for the first time the red threads of veins across her nose, her cheeks. Good grief, I think, you've really let yourself go. You're ageing fast, spent too long in a hot sun. In fact, she doesn't, my sister, look in good shape at all when I inspect her

carefully. How did she get like this? How come it's taken me this long to notice?"

. Are you alright? I ask tentatively. Do you feel OK?

. Of course I am, she snaps. What are you asking for? Don't I look alright?

Her irritation at my question stings me, and suddenly I have had enough of this. I will make contact with her if it kills me.

. Did you get my reply to your last letter Jean? I ask, looking her directly in the eye.

She steps back as though I have slapped her. Then pushing her face towards mine, hissing through clenched teeth,

. I told you not to write to me again about our childhood, and you disobeyed me." How dare you?

⁹¹ The truth is that I failed to notice much, if anything, about my sister. I was entirely unobservant. It was in part a cultivated lack of attention of course. A reaction to having needed to observe her every move as a child because my existence seemed to depend on it. But it was also a lifetime's habit of preoccupation, of being self-absorbed, focused on the impact of the internal interaction going on between us. This had always rendered me blind in a certain way. My lifetime's feeling of my sister as dangerous was still alive and undiminished by the therapeutic work I was engaged in. So I was prepared to attempt some kind of different sistering relationship with her but my fear meant that I could not contemplate a particularly close one. A distanced 'friendliness' was my goal. For overlaid now on my historic fear of my sister was my growing awareness of what I perceived to be my sister's damaged and damaging behaviours. My therapeutic work had made me finally understand that it is necessary to protect our selves from psychic harm, to lay down and hold to certain boundaries, if necessary, in the face of powerful familial claims made on one.

I gawp at her. I am astonished. So is this what it's about after all?

- I'm sorry if the letter upset you, that wasn't my intention. Quite the opposite. And I didn't write about our childhood. In fact I tried to reassure you that I wouldn't raise it intentionally with you.

- But you didn't promise not to ever talk about it again. Her voice rises wildly. A passer by gives her a curious look. Oh god, this wasn't my brightest idea. And then,

- I couldn't read it, she spits out. I won't read your letters, I won't.

- Then how do you know what I wrote? I ask the obvious confusing question.

- I made Peter read it. I wouldn't touch it. Peter read it to me.

She is visibly shaking with what I take to be distress.

⁹² I suggest that my sister's use of this word was an accurate expression of her need to be able to control the outcomes of any future interactions between us. On the face of it a remarkable word for one adult sister to use to another adult sister. But my sister was not in an adult state at this moment. She was my 'big' sister, used to decades of my obedience to her wishes, and she was also a traumatised and terrified child who felt overwhelming terror in the face of a loss of control over me.

I am silent. I am out of my depth here. There is something very wrong with Jean's behaviour and I will not work it out standing here in the scorching sun. I gently take her arm, as though she is an invalid, yes; there is that quality about her, that is how I feel as I steer her through the market stalls.

- Let's shop now, I say, or else we'll miss all the goodies.

She shakes off my arm and stomps heavily away.

That afternoon it is Alex's turn to accompany Jean to the Intermarche in the next quest for the best ingredients, whilst I opt for a walk across the nearby hillside with Peter. I am no more successful with him than with my sister. He keeps his tone light and discussion general, he does not, will not, connect with me at our usual level. This isn't about the work débâcle, we've already discussed it and Peter has been accepting, suspiciously so at some level, about it." No, Peter is employing the same distancing

⁹³ For several years my brother-in-law had worked as a tutor on a programme which I managed in an educational setting. The tutors' contract included both sessional teaching and weekend schools where two tutors would run a residential two day school for the students. All tutors working on the programme were required to give a clear commitment to delivering the weekend schools as well as the evening sessions. I became aware of a problem when several tutors on the programme eventually approached me to ask me to deal with my brother-in-law. He was increasingly opting out of the evening session and overnight stay at the weekend school, leaving his co-tutor in sole charge and returning the following morning. The tutors got fed up with it and embarrassed but determined came to me to sort it out. It was the first I knew of it. I had not been consulted by my brother-in-law about this change in his working pattern. When confronted he argued that his co-tutor had always been fine about it and that he 'needed' to be at home. When

technique, not letting me in, holding me at arm's length." I feel hugely frustrated. Every one of my moves to talk about Jean, the letters, my concerns, all blocked before I'm started. I give up and just enjoy the walk and peaceful landscape. I'll think about this later, talk to Alex.

- How did you get on with big sis? I murmur.

It is evening and we are ambling slowly around the ancient town walls before supper. The light is wonderful. Bats circle the church tower up in front of us, black darts against the deepening azure sky.

- Oh, it was fine, says Alex. Well, apart from the fact that Jean forgot to take the kitty so she asked me to stump up at

pressed by me on this point he refused point blank to elaborate. I asked him to comply with his contract in future and he agreed to do so. This did not happen. The next weekend school saw a repeat of the previous ones. As manager I had no choice but to issue a formal warning to my brother-in-law. He took this on the chin with an insouciance which was difficult to understand. He still refused to offer an explanation for his absence. (Yet another hidden secret I later recognised.) I did not want to lose him from the programme; he was an exceptional tutor and I valued his work, so we agreed that he would only work on day schools being offered the following year. As it happened on my return to work in the September after this week in France my boss heard about the work problems and instructed me not to renew my brother-in-law's contract. His view was that he was not going to allow a tutor who had trashed his contract the chance to 'cherry pick' the tutoring jobs in the programme. I had to comply. The timing of this was most unfortunate and I knew that the real reason for his being dropped as a tutor was likely to be hidden from his family and misconstrued by them.

⁶⁴ This was such a change in our relationship. For many years my brother-in-law had used me, inappropriately on both our parts I would now acknowledge, as a confidante in his difficulties with my sister and his expressed intention of separation from her once the children had grown up. We had always had a close and affectionate relationship up to this point. Indeed I would have described it as a respectful relationship on both sides but this now began to feel one-sided.

the checkout. Christ, your sister knows how to live the good life!

- I feel bad about this you know, I confess. I really should have thought to warn you about Jean and food bills.

- Oh stop it Sue, you're not responsible for Jean. And anyway, I'll get reimbursed from the kitty, so it isn't a problem.....no, I'm quite happy eating lentils for the next three months, don't you think another thing about it...!

I poke her in the ribs as we walk.

- Might do you some good, I come back at her. Yes, OK, me too...!

At supper they drop a bombshell.

- Did we mention that we might go off for a couple of days while you're here? Peter inquires, oh so casually.

Did they hell. Alex and I exchange glances. What is this about?

- I don't think you did Peter, say I, playing along. Is that what you're thinking of doing then?

- Mmm Yes. We'll go off tomorrow first thing. We're going to have a couple of nights B & B we think. Nothing planned, just a wander. That's OK with you two isn't it?

I consider Jean thoughtfully. She has said nothing, let Peter do all the talking, and keeps her eyes firmly on her plate, no eye contact to be made. Alex sensibly leaves it to me to make our response.

- We'll be fine if that's what you want to do. We better sort out house keys and so on. When do you plan to be back?

- Oh, we'll just be gone a couple of days. Friday, we'll be back Friday. Early evening time I guess.

- You'll make sure to cook the supper Sue, so we've got a meal to come home to.

Jean finally speaks and it is to lay down an order; the tone makes it very clear that it's not to be considered as a request.

I bridle at the tone and feel my usual stubborn resistance kick in.

· We'll make sure there's something for you, I say lightly.

· No, not just 'something'. Jean dictates, I mean a proper meal. I want a proper meal. You'll cook a proper meal."

What is this? For god's sake, I've just about had enough of this.
Peter reads me accurately and leaps in:

· Come on Jean love, you know Sue won't let the standards drop round here. Right, let's go and pack our stuff. Come on, chop, chop.

Alex and I are left sitting at the table. Neither of us speaks for a moment, but look at each other. I realise Alex isn't sure if she has missed something, but then she sees I'm as dumbfounded as her.

· Well, she says slowly, what do we think this is all about?

· I don't know what to think, I murmur, but I do know what I feel. And that's relief. I'm actually very happy to have a couple of days break from my sister's company. Alex nods her head emphatically.

The next two days are dreamy, slow and hot. It is very hot.

⁹⁵ I view this as a somewhat forlorn last attempt on my sister's part to reassert the old pattern of power relations between us.

But there is not a lot we can do even should we want to. They have made sure of that, taking the English car, the one which is insured for me to drive, leaving the decrepid Citroen, the car which is not insured for me. I am furious at this act of spite, for what else am I to think? Jean will have insisted on it and Peter will have, as ever, caved in. And this leads me to ponder deeply on this current scenario. As we sit in the shade on the terrace, saunter round the village lanes, we discuss 'the flight', which is what I find myself naming it. As soon as the words are out, I know that they express the underlying feel to the whole episode which my subconscious has picked up on.

. You know, I don't know why I think this yet Alex, but I keep coming back to the feeling that Peter has hi-jacked Jean in effect. He's decided for whatever reason that she needs to be got away from here, from us." And for whatever reason of her own, she's gone along with it. Taking that car tells me loud and clear how angry she is, that's for sure.

⁹⁰ I wonder here if this was my brother-in-law's last-ditch attempt to avert a 'scene' between his wife and sister-in-law? He was privy to my sister's private behaviour (unknown to me at the time) and feelings over the week and was desperate I think to prevent happening what he felt was coming. There is also another possible explanation, to do with Peter's discomfort with me, highlighted by our walk together. He had his own reasons to put and keep some distance between us. Given our previous close relationship it must have put a strain on him to keep the secret which I realised much later he had been safeguarding.

We spend the rest of the day trying to get me to ride a bike, something I've never learned to do. We have fun and thoroughly enjoy ourselves, Alex giving me a clap when I manage to wobble a few yards under my own steam. The quiet evening passes in a simple meal, books, talk. The following day follows much the same rhythm until after lunch when we feel like doing something, but what? I know, says Alex, we'll walk into M..... It's 6 kilometres away, but we'll take it slowly, keep to the shade where we can, get a taxi back to the cottage.

And that is what we do. Before we go though I prepare a meal for Jean and Peter, just in case we are later coming back than we expect to be. A couple of bowls of salads and a shop-bought quiche which Alex slipped into the Intermarche trolley the previous day lie plated in the fridge. We leave a note directing them to it.

. That's OK, says Alex, we've done what she asked.

I keep quiet not wanting to reveal my spiteful payback to Jean. I'm still furious about the car, so I have sent a clear message to Jean with the meal which I know she will not misread. Shop bought quiches are anathema to my sister; they come under various headings in Jean's mind, 'processed food' being the least pejorative. But Alex is not to know this. I have in effect just

thumbed my nose at big sis. It is childish, I know this, but I'm fed up."

We wait until the worst of the heat has passed and set off. The quiet tree-lined road into M... offers the shortest route and shade. We are close to the town when I see a familiar English car approaching. And quite suddenly, out of the blue, I am quite overwhelmed with fear. Fear and anxiety. The kind that overtook me as a small child when I knew I had incurred Jean's wrath and I would pay dearly for it. Is this just an extreme reaction of guilt to my act of spite with the quiche? I don't know, all I know is that as the car slows down to pull up beside us I feel quite sick with apprehension.

Peter is driving with the window rolled down.

· Hello, we say in chorus, bending down to the open window. Had a good time?

Peter is cheerful, looks relaxed. I risk a look at Jean. My fears are instantly confirmed. Trouble is written across her face, I read it instinctively. She turns towards us, unsmiling.

⁹⁷ Writing this produces the insight I did not have up to now. My response to my sister came out of the childhood 'little sister' role which her previous demand for a 'proper' meal was addressed to. Unconsciously I responded and repeated a pattern of childish defiance out of the old subordinate positioning to my sister. It was ever thus. My sister would command and I would comply, but just now and again I rebelled. Defiance of course always provoked retribution.

- *What are you doing? She demands, where are you going to?*
- *Decided to walk into town, I say falsely upbeat. We might do a bit of holiday shopping.*
- *How are you going to get back? Again, unsmiling, aggressive questioning.*
- *Oh, don't worry about that Jean, says Alex, we'll pick up a taxi in the town square.*
- *What about our supper? Truculence in every line of her.*
- *We've left some for you in case we get back late. Left it in the fridge, you'll see the note. I realise I am trying, against all my better instincts, to be ingratiating.*
- *You mean it's a cold meal? Jean's voice could not be any colder than the fridge in which the maligned meal sits.*

And then she turns to face the front of the car, hits Peter smartly on his leg, just as though he is the horse between the shafts, and barks 'drive on Peter, drive on.'

Peter rolls the car forward without another word or glance, and the car disappears around the bend.

We are left standing by the side of the dusty road looking after them.

· Oh dear, says Alex, oh dear, oh dear, what's happened there? Your sister Sue is one unhappy bunny.

I'm not too cheerful at this precise moment either."

My mood, anxiety, lightens as we reach M.... There's no point in worrying about it I decide. I can't do anything about Jean's mood, her unhappiness, for yes, I have finally realised that my sister, despite her protestations, her pronouncements of how wonderful her life in France is, is clearly an unhappy woman. I mustn't get locked in to old responses, old stuff. She is keeping me out. Peter is keeping me out. Why I still don't know, but so be it then. I have a new path to travel and I set my feet to walk it firmly.

We enjoy our few hours in the town, wandering through market stalls, into the patisserie to buy a treat to take back and share.

We decide to eat at one of the restaurants in the town square.

⁵⁴ And so the die is cast. Her last final move as 'big sister' has been given a comprehensive nose-thumbing. I am now fair game in my sister's mind.

- We've left them their meal, says Alex reasonably, so let's spoil ourselves.

Neither of us has to say the shared unspoken thought of not wanting to hurry back particularly. We eventually pick up a taxi and turn for the village, drawing up at the cottage in the dark. It's around nine pm and we both can't help feeling like dirty stop outs.

- No, says Alex, as we climb the steps to the house, actually it's not that. It's more like...why do I feel like a naughty child?

I snort.

- Because you've got tarred with my brush, I say. Welcome to the naughty little sister club.

We push open the door and walk in. It is quiet. No sound of voices, or music.

- Hello, we call out. Hi, we're back.

Jean's voice floats up from the terrace.

• He, come and join me.

We go down the stairs and move together, me ahead of Alex, onto the terrace. Jean is sitting in the lounge and pulls herself to her feet at the sight of us. Glass in her hand, I watch as she weaves her way carefully towards us. It is the voice. It is the voice that registers before anything else. It sets every bell ringing. My body vibrates. It is her smoothest, silkiest tone. That and her smile, the expression pinned on the face which is shiny red, eyes glittering. Her gait, familiar enough, is distinctly unsteady. Another bell sounds in my head but it is muffled for the moment, made indistinct by the adrenalin now pumping through my body. Every survival instinct is on red alert.

• He, she purrs, I thought I heard you arrive. Come and have a drink with me. I'm all on my own. Peter's gone out to the concert at the church.

She turns the full blast of her charm on Alex who smiles obligingly and tries to get me to move forward. I am rooted to the spot. My body says 'this far and no further'. I can't shift my feet another inch towards Jean. As Jean moves away, back towards the lounge, both swaying slightly, I whip round to face Alex.

- Don't, I say urgently. Don't have a drink with her. Come upstairs with me.

Alex looks puzzled.

- What's the matter? She says sotto voce, why shouldn't we have a drink with her, just to be friendly?
- Because she's dangerous, I say, don't, for god's sake.

Alex peers at me uncomprehendingly. She can't, I realise, hear what I am saying, can't possibly know what I know.

- I'm going upstairs to read Jean, I call out, I've had enough wine for tonight.

I turn back to Alex who is looking at me ever puzzled.

- Come upstairs with me, I plead.
- It's OK Sue, Alex smiles, I'll be fine.
- listen, I say, watch yourself, be careful. Remember, she's dangerous.

And then I flee. Fight or flight. Flight every time when it comes to big sister in this mood. Funny thing, fear. I could always stand my ground with Dad, but it's far more terrible with Jean, never with Jean.

I make myself sit down quietly in the sitting room. I breathe deeply, slow down my pulse, my galloping heart. I make myself pick up my book and start to read. Little by little I quieten, find my calm place, do a little meditation. There, that feels much better. Everything seems fine. I am worrying unnecessarily. I read on, start to get involved in my book and then something catches my attention, some noise from the terrace. What is that? Is it?...no, it can't be. It sounds like raised voices, like people arguing. Jean and Alex? Arguing? No, surely not?

But there are raised voices. I can't pretend to myself any longer the evidence of my own perfectly sound ears. Instantly I flood with fear, with panic. Oh, god, oh Christ, if they are rowing, what shall I do? How do I extricate Alex? I am on my feet and running down the stairs without any answer in my head. All I know is that I have to get Alex off the terrace, away from Jean somehow.

I step out on to the terrace to find Alex and Jean frozen in the act of argument. Both of them stop in mid air at my appearance.

Jean is flushed darkly, and her face is pure malevolence, twisted with some expression I can't read. Alex is visibly upset, she has tears in her eyes, is clutching a tissue in her hand. I am horrified.

Well, I say, not having an idea how to continue, I thought I heard voices. Looks like it's time for a cup of tea, yes?

And with that stunningly original line I exit, leaping up the stairs into the kitchen, and grab the kettle. It looks as though I am indeed going to follow through on my inane suggestion. I stand at the sink filling the kettle, my mind whirling, trying to process what is happening, how to close it down whatever it is. And then I become aware of Jean's voice. It permeates my brain, somewhere it connects with my deepest instincts and I lean out of the window to hear the better. Jean and Alex are both sitting directly beneath the kitchen window, a few feet away from where I am filling the kettle. I can hear her quite clearly.

Jean is talking, talking hurriedly now. She is telling Alex that I am always untrustworthy. That I always betray my friends, that I never keep confidences. This is why I always lose my friends in the end, why no-one will put up with me. It is best that Alex is warned of this, yes, she feels that she has to let Alex know. She's

really sorry for Alex to find out this way, but it's probably for the best before I hurt her even more.

I am cold now. I haven't any idea what Jean is talking about but I do know the game she is playing. It is the sting. She has set it up with great carefulness, with thoroughness and calculation as always, and she is carrying it through with superb playacting. I have been here many, many times before in my life. She is feeding her poison gently, sorrowfully, practised first with my parents, now with my friend.

I stand frozen with the kettle in my hand, thinking furiously. In the past when this happened I never had a defence ready. Or, any defence I could muster wasn't sufficient to save me. It was always too late, the damage was already done, my position irretrievable. This time Jean has made a mistake. She has revealed her game to me, and this is because her judgement, her usual superbly accurate calculation, has been impaired by alcohol. Vast quantities of alcohol. My sister is virtually paralytic by now, was, in fact when we walked in.

It seems that I have two choices. I can continue games-playing, not letting on what I have overheard, extricate Alex and sort things out with her later, if that's possible. Or I can stop the game, stop it right now. Stop it for good. I think about my

depression, my therapy with Beth, my problems with trust, my insights painfully emerging after a lifetime of struggle with this sistering relationship, and I know there is only one choice to be made.”

I put down the kettle, go back down the stairs, walk out on to the terrace and draw up a chair to the table where Alex and Jean are sitting. They are both silent, looking at me.

• I was filling the kettle, by the window, I say conversationally.

I nod upwards towards it.

• And I heard what you said Jean. What I heard you say was this.

And I repeat it, word for word.

She sits motionless, open-mouthed. She doesn't take her eyes off me.

⁹⁹ Miller (1987a) says 'The suffering person begins to be articulate and breaks with her former compliant attitudes, but because of her early experience she cannot believe she is not incurring mortal danger...[but] awareness of her own impulses has already been aroused, and there is no going back...Now the once intimidated and silenced child can experience herself in a way she had never before thought possible, and afterwards can enjoy the relief of having taken the risk and been true to herself (pp18 and 19).

• I'd like an explanation please. What is this about? What are you up to?

Jean is rendered speechless. She is clearly totally wrong footed. Alex also sits transfixed. Then she suddenly comes to life. She looks at Jean, then turns her head and looks very carefully at me. She scrutinises me for a long moment, then makes up her mind, turns her head towards Jean once more and says sharply,

• Yes Jean, what are you up to? What is this all about?

There is this moment when the world, our world, hangs in the balance. And someone nudges it. Just a smidgen, just as Alex has done. And then it explodes.

Jean rises to her feet, her face is deeply frightening. Twisted, puce, spitting saliva, she shrieks as she points at me.

• You! she screams, You!

She seizes the table with both hands and overturns it with a single movement. Bottles, glasses, wine splinter across the terrace, shower us.

She leans in towards me. I make myself sit absolutely still.

I hate you, hate you. I loathe you. I have hated you from the day you were born. I have never wanted you to be my sister. I have always detested you as my sister. I don't want you as a sister any more. Never, never, never. Do you hear me you little bitch. Get out of my sight. Get out of my house. Get out of my life.¹⁰⁰

She lurches, staggers off the terrace, disappears into the bedroom.

Alex and I sit side by side in silence, unmoving for a long time. My thoughts, my feelings interest me. I am quite calm, shell shocked of course, the reactions come later. But I am also, in a very curious sense, lighter. I have finally heard what I always have known. It is such a relief, no - a release.

Eventually I rouse myself. I am frightened for Alex who looks utterly bereft. I feel dreadful that she has been put through this, exposed to my sister's madness. I reach a hand out and then put

¹⁰⁰ Miller (1987a) says 'the repression of brutal abuse experienced during childhood drives many people to destroy their lives and the lives of others...using this destruction to hide the truth from themselves and avoid feeling the despair of the tormented child they once were' (p 3). Even more eloquently later in the text does Miller give an explanation for my sister's behaviour that night. '*But illegitimate hatred never disappears [author's italics]. It may switch scapegoats but it will remain ever-present and undiluted. It cannot be appeased; It poisons and blinds the soul, devours the memory and the mind, and kills the capacity for compassion and insight. Its destructive power stems from a history of horror that has been repressed and stored in the body...Hating and offending an innocent person, using him as a scapegoat, can only strengthen the walls of our inner prison of confusion, isolation, fear, and loneliness; it cannot free us*' (p 133).

my arms round her. She sobs quietly for a minute and then pulls herself together visibly.

- I have to ask you Sue, how did Jean know all that stuff?
- What stuff? I ask quietly. What was it she was telling you?
- All the stuff about the kitty and the cost of the food bills and how pissed off I am about it. How could she know all that stuff?

I look at Alex in utter bewilderment. I have absolutely no idea how Jean has that knowledge.

I take a deep breath.

- Just think back Alex. Think back to what she said. Can you remember exactly what Jean said to you about it?
- I don't know Sue, I feel so confused. She said that you had told Peter everything I'd said to you about the food expenses and Peter had told her. She said Peter told her that I was unhappy about living at a level I felt was extravagant, even though I enjoyed it at the same time.

I immediately recognise the words, the phrase. I recognise them because I wrote them. They are the words I have written myself in my journal. Jean has yet again made a mistake. She has taken my words and repeated them verbatim to Alex.

- Just wait there, I say. I'm going to get something to show you*

And I return with my journal, open it and find the entry.

- Read it, I say, just read it.*

- I can't do that Sue, Alex says scandalised. It's your private diary!*

I manage a sort of laugh.

- Oh Alex, I say sadly, if only everyone had your scruples. Just read it.*

And there it is, the explanation. Jean's sting lays unravelled for us both to see. Coming home from meeting us on the road, eating her cold meal of shop bought quiche, Jean's fury, stoked by more and more alcohol, gets the better of her. And when Peter goes off to his concert, Jean seizes her chance. She must have had

to search pretty thoroughly but she found what she was after, and it didn't take her very long to work out how to use it. Why she would want to do so is a question I cannot go near tonight.¹⁰¹

At some level I must have registered Peter's return. He has gone into their bedroom and stayed there, fully conscious of his wife screaming her head off on the terrace outside the door. I suppose he must be quite disappointed at not being able to head off the denouement he knew Jean was intent on having if she possibly could manage it.

Astonishingly Jean appears back on the terrace.

- I've discussed the matter with Peter and we're both agreed that you have abused our hospitality. You must leave now.

I really do have to hand it to her. As raddled as she is with booze, she hasn't lost her ability to think on her feet and take back the initiative.

¹⁰¹ I theorise that what plays out here between my sister and my friend is the final occasion when my sister finds herself compelled to act out her projections onto me. It is psychologically crucial for her to get Alex to take on her view of me. She has relied on her facility for being able to convince people of this throughout our lives. At this precise moment this need has never been more necessary to her. And it fails to be met. In the moment when Alex makes up her mind and indicates to my sister that she rejects her version of me and rather trusts her own she unwittingly delivers my sister's nemesis. My sister does the only thing left to her now; she delivers in turn the nemesis to our sistering relationship.

- I'm not prepared to discuss anything more with you tonight in your state, I say nastily. We aren't going anywhere except to bed. We'll sort this out in the morning.

She wavers momentarily, realises that she's not able to physically throw us out on the spot and Peter won't co-operate with that.

- You'll go first thing in the morning, she says threateningly, and turns away.

And as she turns away I know with the certainty of all our history between us that whatever transpires in the morning Jean has already got her version of the night's events worked out and in place. It will be her version which will prevail. It will be a calumny but I will be powerless to prevent it.

We find it impossible to go to bed. Both of us in different ways are traumatised by the evening's events. But we find comfort in each other and try to decide how best to handle the morning. Alex feels that she must leave even if the picture changes in the morning. She can't bring herself to stay with someone who has abused her as Jean has done. I agree. We'll leave and have our second week's holiday elsewhere. But I insist to Alex that I shall try to get some kind of explanation from Jean in the morning when hopefully she's a bit more sober. I want to confront her with

my journal. How I don't know. I feel confused. I'm still reeling from Jean's viciousness, such hatred directed at me. I am profoundly shocked as well as released.

The morning finally arrives and Alex and I are already packed up but have stowed our bags out of sight for the moment. Peter arrives first in the kitchen and behaves as though it were a perfectly ordinary day. No mention of the previous evening. What do we want for breakfast? Shall we have it outside? ¹⁰²I feel like I'm underwater, where the sounds are distorted, muffled. But then Jean erupts into the kitchen. Flushed, belligerent, she stands in the middle of the room, arms akimbo.

- You still here? She jeers. Get yourselves off. You're not welcome.

Alex gasps at the deliberate crude offensiveness.

Peter rouses himself.

¹⁰² My brother-in-law was also adept at denial in my view. And he was out of his depth. I suggest he knew his strategy of absenting my sister had failed miserably and with an outcome that even he did not anticipate. I would speculate further to suggest that by this point in his marriage my brother-in-law, instead of separating from his wife, had taken the polar opposite route and become my sister's co-dependent. I am aware of the disputed terrain of the concept of 'co-dependency'. Notwithstanding this, I would argue that his relationship with my sister by this time was characterised by the accepted markers of co-dependency; excessive caretaking of my sister, wholly pre-occupied with my sister's behaviour and lifestyle, systematic denial or excessive compliance (see Rice 1998).

- *Stop it Jean, he says, they're having breakfast and then I'll take them down to the town.*

- *Not before Jean's given us an explanation for her behaviour last night. I look directly at her.*

I wave my journal clutched in my hand in her face. My anger surges and I try to control my voice, appear calm.

- *What's the meaning of this, eh, Jean? You searched for and found my journal, my private journal. Then you took information from it to set Alex up with a pack of lies. What is all this about? Why these appalling lies to my friend, mm? I'm waiting for an explanation and an apology, not least to Alex.*

Jean laughs in my face.

- *You think I'm going to give you an apology!*

- *I expect nothing less.*

- *Oh shut your face she yells. Prissy little sister. I'm not bothering to listen to another word.*

And she puts her fingers in her ears. 'La, la, la, la' she sings.

We all look at her in disbelief. This is a fifty year old woman going on four. Peter finally acts.

- Just stop that Jean, he orders. Go into the sitting room and stay there until we've left.

And he takes her by the shoulders and tries to push her towards the door. But she is too heavy, too stropky for him. I move back to the worktop in the kitchen which I lean against watching Peter struggle with my sister. She suddenly lunges forward and he loses his grip on her. She comes straight at me with a swiftness I don't have time to register. Grabbing hold of me by the throat she screams abuse into my face. I can't hear what she is saying because fear stops me breathing, hearing. All I am conscious of is that I can see the Sabatier knives out of the corner of my eye on the worktop and I know instantaneously that Jean has registered them too. Her hand shoots out and reaches the nearest one. I am paralysed, frozen in terror. But Peter is quicker. He has her hand holding the knife slammed down on the counter, and with his other hand and all his weight he forces Jean back and her grip loosens. I push her away with all my strength.

I turn to Alex. She is ashen faced. I catch her hand.

- We're going, we're going now. Get your bag. Come on.

We grab our things and sprint through the door, hurtle down the steep steps and pause at the bottom of the path next to the car.

Neither of us speaks. There are no words for this moment.

Chapter Six Sisters in Silence

I put down the bag of flour carefully on the doorstep and stand back to survey my, well, almost perfect, grass circles. It is a lovely spring morning, the light clear, the sky a gentle washed out blue and I have grasped the nettle of trying to reshape the deadening rectangle of lawn we have inherited with our new home. Rob comes out of the door as I stand here scrutinising my handiwork. He looks at the lawn, the flour bag, and laughs, walks across to put an arm round me.

- Trust you to find a nutty way of doing it. What happens when that big black rain cloud up there dumps its rain?

I look up involuntarily. The sky is virtually cloudless.

- Oh, ha ha, I murmur. What do you think? That shape will give us two decent flower beds to plant up.

- It's looking great. I have to say I'm quite impressed. Didn't know your geometry was up to working it out.

I pick up a weed to throw at him and he moves off smiling, calling back that the kettle's on.

I lean on the spade, regard the house and garden along with Rob's retreating back, and for the millionth time I feel gratitude. My life has been transformed and I wake every single day with happiness and gratitude in my

heart. Sometimes I say to Rob that my life has come to me in two (very) hopefully more or less equal halves. BF and AF. Before Fifty and After Fifty. Fifty was my turning point, my depression the pivot which turned my face away from my troubled past. Fifty was when I found Beth, and so began to find myself. I began a therapeutic journey which proved to be transformational. Over the seven years we worked together I learned so much, not enough of course, never enough, but enough to shift my life onto a quite different path, inhabit a quite different paradigm.¹⁰³

I read of course, voraciously, gulping down great draughts of Jung, Klein, Winnicott, Alice Miller, especially Alice Miller. I started writing, not to put down already formed thoughts, but rather writing as an exploration, as an act of inquiry in itself.¹⁰⁴ I talked endlessly to those close friends who were happy to make the journey with me, and later, after we had met, Rob. And I learnt trust. Of all the gifts which my work with Beth gave me this is the best. I learnt to trust Beth and through that I learnt to trust others. Most of all I learnt to trust myself.

¹⁰³ Mauthner (2002) recognizes the potential impact of therapy on the sistering relationship. It can 'contribute[d] to some women's ability to both reflect and be reflexive about their experience. It also suggests links between therapy, experience, developing a language, and the production of knowledge' (p 112). 'Agentic subjectivity' as understood here can allow for us to create 'a reflexively ordered narrative of self' (see Giddens 1992) which is just what I am attempting here.

¹⁰⁴ I have talked a little earlier about this. Clough (2002) talks about writing which blurs distinctions between form and content, between researcher and researched, between data and imagination; He reiterates the point made earlier that language itself does the work of inquiry. Cixous (1997) describes it as a mysterious but vital force that can take the writer further than we would otherwise be able to go. It is a view I share of writing as meaning-making. Half-glimpsed aspects of ourselves can be accessed through our writing as we 'reach intuitively into some parts of ourselves that is outside our notice, still unnamed but there.'(personal note, unknown source).

I learnt to be content, with myself and with my life. I stopped my search for a partner, focusing on what I had got in my life, my expanding circle of friends, my music, and most of all my children. The decade of my fifties was transformational in this profound sense too. I found my adult children to be my life's blessings and they in their turn enfolded me with open arms, gladly, generously, lovingly.¹⁰⁵

I bend my head to smell the narcissi, the jonquils nodding in the soft breeze.
I feel sudden tears coming as I remember Beth's benediction.

- The best gift we can give our children is to sort ourselves out. That's when the damage stops being handed down. That's what gives our children their future.¹⁰⁶

And having stopped looking for the decent man and started loving my own life, along comes Rob. Of course. This is how it works, well, sometimes, if you're lucky.

I have found happiness. Peace, contentment. Children, now grandchildren.¹⁰⁷
But I have lost my sister. Through all the intervening years, twelve years

¹⁰⁵ Miller (1987a) resonates here with me. 'We are robbed of these instinctual abilities... if we are exploited in our childhood for the substitute gratification of our parents' needs. Fortunately however...we can also restore these abilities as soon as we are determined to face our truth' (p 57).

¹⁰⁶ Miller (1987a) offers a further insight with which my own experience chimes. 'It is very fortunate when our older children become aware of what we were doing and are able to tell us about it. We are then given the opportunity to recognize our failures and to apologise. Acknowledging what we have done may help them, at last, to throw off the chains of neglect, discrimination, scorn and misuse of power that have been handed on for generations' (p 86).

¹⁰⁷ I would not describe this as a 'homecoming' which has been offered to me by close friends as a description of my journey. After all, that implies that one once had a home, lost it, and then re-found it. I would rather recognise it as the *creation* of a home.

now, we have not found our way back to each other. Did I *have* to lose my sister to find this life I now have? Is this the price? Is this the right question? Or could it have been, could it be, possible to have both?

I do not know.¹⁰⁸ I remember telling Beth the story when I got back from France. She asked me the expected question of how I felt about losing my sister and I said without hesitation 'Oh, a large part of me feels released, oops no, I mean relieved.' Beth studied me. 'No', she said firmly, 'you mean 'released'. That is the word your psyche threw up Sue'.

I have re-run that night in France so many times in my head. What if I hadn't confronted her? What if I had understood much more quickly her chronic dependence on alcohol? What if I had gone on my own and not with Alex?¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ This is a particularly difficult but crucial question for me. One tentative, provisional answer is to say that it was the shock of what happened in France between myself and my sister and its aftermath that pushed me into this exploration. I think it is unlikely that I would have spent the best part of a decade otherwise trying to come to terms with, to seek to understand, our relationship. I am also conscious of the fact that the silence from my sister has helped me to reflect, to unravel the Gordian knot of our relationship, and to gain some equilibrium. If I had still been actively engaged in some kind of relationship with my sister I realise that this would have clouded the issues and made me less sure of wishing to probe deeper. So I seem to be edging towards saying that silence, sometimes, can be a blessing, a site of creativity and knowledge. I am aware as I write this of a conflict of feelings; my intuitive knowledge tells me it is best this way, my head tells me there is no other possibility whilst ever my sister remains unchanged in her behaviours and insights, and my emotional history tells me I have failed yet again at being the good sister, the good daughter. This last feeling prompts me to instruct myself that whilst some scripts are impossible to erase our task is to refuse to act on them.

¹⁰⁹ Mauthner (2002) in her discussion on *positionality* is pertinent here and to the footnote above. The position we find ourselves in can be actively used to construct meaning rather than simply discover it. More, it suggests that we be both an agent and also positioned in various discourses simultaneously. Arriving with my friend arguably positioned me in two discourses simultaneously; that of biological sister and that of 'fictive kin' with Alex. I acted 'agentially' to negotiate these two positions throughout the week's stay.

And what of Jean? What if, when I challenged her to explain her actions that night, she had said, 'I'm trying to drive a wedge between you and Alex because I'm so jealous I can't bear it. Because you're the sister to her that you have never been to me, and I deserve it. Because I looked after you when Mum didn't. Because I had to see my father kill a man because of you. Because I have lost my way and my heart is breaking and you owe me.'

Ah yes. What if that had been said?

And what if I had said I am sorry? I am sorry for your pain and grief and heartbreak. I am sorry that I have never been able to be the sister that you wanted, yes, that you deserve to have. I am truly sorry to have flaunted my chosen sister under your nose. That was insensitive and deeply hurtful to you. I am sorry that I cannot re-write history, that I cannot become unborn, that I cannot give us different parents. I am more sorry than I can say that I cannot put any of our history right for you because it is not, it has never been, in my power to do so. But it is within our power to transcend, transform our history. Shall we become sisters now? ¹¹⁰

But none of this was said. And it never has been, or will be now.¹¹¹ And she has been missing from most of the important events of my life, missed so much of my happiness, my joys.

¹¹⁰ Miller (1987a) says 'the damage done to us during our childhood cannot be undone...We can however change ourselves. We can repair ourselves and gain our lost integrity by choosing to look more closely at the knowledge that is stored inside [us]...This path, although certainly not easy, is the only route by which we can at last leave behind the cruel, invisible prison of our childhood' (p 2).

¹¹¹ It is not only my concerns as to my sister's mental health which precludes this but my brother-in-law's role of collusion makes it doubly problematic. Indeed I have had to painfully recognise that this collusion has spread down to the younger members of their family. It is just as Beth said; thus is damage handed on to the next generation.

She has not been here to see my closeness with my children, our open pleasure in each other's company, our abiding love for each other, the good and hard times, the laughs and grumbles we share together.

She has not been here to share my joy of Rob, our marriage, our stunning wedding day, our life together. They have never met, my husband and my sister.

She has not visited our new home, in the village where our grandfather worked as a blacksmith and now lies buried in the churchyard.

She has never met my grandchildren, her great-nephews. She has not seen me in my grandmother role, the boundless joy these two small boys give me.

She has not known me as I am now, the me of After Fifty, the healed me, the whole me.

She has not met me.

And for that matter neither have I met her.¹¹²

¹¹² I am theorising here that my sister and I were always 'unknown' to each other because of the way in which our relationship was set up from the start by our father's behaviour and then our mother's demands. We were bound into a disabled, disabling and abusive relationship from day one. Both of us had to find a 'false self' (see Winnicott 1965) to cope with the dynamics of our family and to survive it emotionally, and this is what we turned to each other throughout childhood and beyond. We were unable together to find a way to transcend this history as adults and, with an authentic and autonomous subjectivity, become 'known' to each other.

I think back now to that time in France and I wonder at my lack of insight, my blind ineptitude at picking up the signs which were virtually flashing at me in foot high neon lettering. I was so used to seeing Jean with a wine glass in her hand. I was used to seeing alcohol as a regular daily part of Jean's life. What's so unusual about that? It's true for a lot of people, used to be true of me. And she managed it so well, on one level at least. Only now, having done my reading, some research, do I understand the significance of Jean being able to stand upright, function as normal, or nearly normal, with the quantity of alcohol she had on board.¹¹³ Only now, far too late, do I know about the stages of alcoholism, the progression from one stage to another, the secretiveness, the deviousness intrinsic to the life of an alcoholic. Well, Jean had always been devious hadn't she? When could I remember a time when she hadn't been, as far as I was concerned at least?

The penny took an unconscionably long time to drop. Several years after the Madame Sabatier moment in fact. Yes, that became our name for my sister. Still is. Our shorthand for marking that dreadful time. Alex and I had a rough time in the immediate aftermath. The experience strengthened our friendship enormously in the long term but the first days, weeks, after that heartbreaking night were wobbly.

We argued over paying the Intermarche bill which Jean insisted we owed her for. Out of all the many incomprehensible acts which involved Peter at that time - a co-dependent as I have now learned to think of him - none was so bizarre as the note he dropped off at the hotel to which he had driven us,

¹¹³ There is a massive literature on alcoholism and I have only dipped my toe into it. I came across two articles which I found particularly relevant. Steele and Southwick (1985) and Miller et al. (1993) who argue that childhood victimisation or abuse has a definite connection to the development of alcohol problems in women.

informing us that Jean wanted reimbursing for the Intermarche bill which Alex had paid. Of course looking back it is easy enough to understand Jean's confusion, unreliable memory, distorted by fury as well as alcohol. For Peter to go along with this demand given what had just taken place I felt was quite mind boggling. Mind you, Alex had an explanation for it.

- Been locked up for too long in the asylum with the bloody lunatic.¹¹⁴

And then we argued. Alex, obsessively scrupulous about paying all bills, insisted on paying it again.

- That's ridiculous, I exploded in the hotel room. You've already paid it. *They* owe *you*, not the other way round. And anyway, we're not around to eat the sodding food, they can scoff all of it. Hope it bloody chokes them.

- That is not the point, Alex raises her voice in exasperation with me. *I* know I've paid the bloody bill, *you* know I've paid it, but *she* doesn't. *She* still thinks we owe her. And I'm absolutely not going to give her even the tiniest opportunity to go around saying that we left with an unpaid debt. You can please yourself, but I'm leaving the money on Reception.

The truth was that we were both traumatised. Differently of course. The issues brought up by the event for each of us keyed in to quite different

¹¹⁴ And as Miller (1987a) says 'the company of prison warders does not encourage lively development' (p 22).

histories, traumas, memories. We tried to hold our selves together, to hold each other, but we were both heartsickened, distraught.

As well as reeling from the brutal severance by Jean I was also struggling with feeling overwhelmingly guilty and that made me diffident and uncertain. I had brought Alex into this situation. I knew what Jean was capable of, Alex didn't. Her much needed holiday, her chance to recuperate, had been destroyed, and I knew she didn't have sufficient funds or holiday leave to make up for it. If she felt angry, resentful of me putting her through this she kept it to herself, but I knew that in her shoes I'd be feeling exactly that.

We didn't talk about it, not properly that is, for a couple of years. And then, one weekend when I was visiting her, we found a way to have the conversation. We spent the hours living it again, telling each other how it had been for each of us, what we had got caught up in from our pasts. It was hard but it had its lighter moments. Later that evening and gripped with hilarity we came up with the title of Madame Sabatier for my sister. Perfect. Well, what else could we call her?

It was only when I met up with an old colleague and friend some time later that the scales finally fell from my myopic eyes. She was also a friend of my sister's and had kept up a contact with her. She was only too aware of the estrangement between us and she asked me openly if she could talk to me about it. In the ensuing discussion I said something about Jean's drinking on that last night in France.

- Ah, she said, paused thoughtfully. So you do know about her drinking then? You knew about it back then? What a problem, a worry it's become. I suppose I've realised that her problems with alcohol must have started years ago.

Good god. How blind could I be? Everything from first to last became clear. Peter picking us up at the train station, her tardy appearance on the first night, the erratic drive to the market and her behaviour there, the sudden two day absence, the flushed face, the weight gain, the puffed-up look, the red thread veins, my inability to get contact with either of them, the careful distancing.....

Jesus wept. I couldn't believe my stupidity. Talk about not wanting to see what's under your nose.

Later on I realised it also explained Peter's behaviour at work over the weekend schools, breaking his contract by his refusal to stay away from home overnight, the timed phone calls back home he wouldn't talk about, his surprising acceptance of being disciplined, taken off the programme.

So, much became clear. A lot got explained by this missing piece of knowledge. But it has taken me many more years to reach a deeper understanding of a sister I cannot forget, who two and a half decades ago turned to me and said 'we must always stick together now, we mustn't let anything come between us'.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ If we had stayed in our positioned discourse roles then how would I describe it? Mauthner (2002) asks her readers to help expand the vocabulary of these

For years after that time in France I was incandescent with anger.¹¹⁶ We had been abused by a drunken vindictive woman and had no redress against such calumny. Peter was no help. The one meeting we had in my house after that holiday when we briefly talked about what had happened told me that Peter did not have the full facts of what had transpired that night and that he didn't want to be apprised of them. He chose, understandably enough, to believe his wife's version. He had after all decided to act out his stern Methodist preacher father's script for him to go forth and save souls. Jean has become his missionary work. These days I find it much harder to forgive Peter for such collusion than I do my sister for her treachery.¹¹⁷

I dream about Jean regularly, even to this day. The first years following France my dreams were furious, rage-filled, hard, unforgiving. In them Jean appeared penitent and I turned my face against her again and again. I thought, in my waking life, that I would never move on from such rage as I had never known before. But slowly the dreams have changed as my understanding, of Jean and myself, has grown.

I dreamt about her last night. I dreamt she was sitting in my house discussing her problems with me. I was being attentive and supportive to her.

discourses and add our own terms. I have thought about this and I offer one as a sub-heading of the positioned minimother role. It is the '*malevolent minimother*'.

¹¹⁶ With the benefit of hindsight and now thankfully free of that terrible fury I can see that much of my childhood rage, suppressed necessarily for decades with my sister, finally poured out. The fact that it continued unabated for several years was both profoundly shocking and quite enlightening to me.

¹¹⁷ Miller (1987a) articulates my feelings here beautifully. 'He is in danger of behaving like a friend who brings a good meal to a prisoner in his cell, at the precise moment when that prisoner has the chance to escape...since this first step into unknown territory would require a great deal of courage, the prisoner may comfort himself with his food and shelter and thus miss his chance and stay in prison' (p 69).

My feelings were warm and friendly. I was concerned for her. I choose to take this as some kind of reconciliation, in my dream world at least.¹¹⁸ I may have to be content with this, indeed I *am* already content with it. Seven years of therapy with Beth and Jung have taught me many things, not least that our dreams reveal us to ourselves.

So I am grateful for the knowledge that I have finally learned a little wisdom along with the lesson of forgiveness, and that within my deepest self I now know myself, in silence notwithstanding, to be a sister.

¹¹⁸ I am acutely conscious here of the danger of sounding both smug and self satisfied but with that rider I do feel something along the lines of what Miller (1987a) expresses towards the end of her seminal text. 'A person who has consciously worked through the tragedy of her own fate will recognise another's suffering more clearly, though the other may be trying to hide it. She will not be scornful of others' feelings, whatever their nature, because she takes her own feelings seriously and knows how to work with them. *She surely will not keep the vicious circle of contempt turning*' (my italics) (p 132).

Epilogue

The year is 2009, the place a plot of land sloping downhill to the main railway line connecting a northern industrial city to all points southwards. Beyond the tracks lies a scattering of factory units dissected by suburban roads and industrial dereliction. Further back, against the skyline, is the brooding bulk of millstone moorland. From this distance it is as undisturbed, silent, beautiful in its sombre way as it was sixty years before.

This plot of land curving down a gentle slope lies within a much larger plot, which itself is subdivided into small parcels of equal size and uniformity. An occasional bird, interested in the overturned earth piling up at the plot's side with its juicy harvest of worms, returns from flight to rest in the top of the tall trees which surround the site and the church. A late Victorian church by style and date stands high across the road keeping watch over its charges laid to rest on the other side. The place is quiet if not empty. Those who work here do not talk whilst those who lie here can no longer.

It is a spring day, the fifteenth day of May, the early afternoon air is warm, with an eggshell sky, a patchwork stain of clouds. One can walk here among these plots on an ordinary day, visiting a particular one or browsing the inscriptions, noting where there are placed abundant floral tributes and where there are none.

But today is different. We are only minutes away from understanding how different this day will be.

For here comes a black car approaching the cemetery, its unmistakable shape identifying its purpose. A hearse, driving slowly, bearing its load and quite alone, unaccompanied by any other car. The coffin it contains and the body within it began its journey a few days previously, on the evening of the ninth of May. Receiving a call from a client the undertaker makes his way into the city lying some miles to the north, to a care home, collects the body as directed and transports it to his funeral parlour where it is rolled on its gantry into the chilled storage unit for the few necessary days.

Contact with the family has been minimal and perfunctory, conducted by the daughter of the deceased, a woman in her sixties and the only next of kin identified to the undertaker, who for this moment knows no different.¹¹⁹ It is this daughter who makes the running, the barest of necessary arrangements, conducted with a brevity, a brusqueness, excused by her explanation of now being resident in France and needing to return *posthaste*.

The funeral director is not the only professional to have noted the slightly off key feeling, one he can't quite place but leaves him uneasy, accustomed as he is by long experience to this work. He has seen them all in his time, the

¹¹⁹ The following story which unfolds was only known to me a year later, that is to say, ten months after my father's death. I had made an arrangement with my father's social worker to keep me informed about him, including his eventual death. This arrangement broke down so that I only accidentally discovered my father's death ten months later. The social services department and social worker concerned have now given me an apology for what they recognise as 'an unacceptable level of service towards me'. However, at the time I was unsure as to whether my father *had* died, where, or how. I set out on yet another sort of journey, which involved me in obtaining a copy of my father's death certificate, visiting my mother's grave to see if my father was buried there (he wasn't), contacting several local councils' burial and cremation departments in an attempt to find my father's remains, visiting and talking with the residential care home where my father died and with his care worker, finding out which undertakers had been used to deal with my father's remains and going to visit them, and finally tracking down and talking to the vicar who had interred my father's body. The process took me several days, revealed a hitherto undiscovered talent for sleuthing, and a little more time to digest.

profoundly grieving relatives, the distraught family and friends, and the relieved ones, but going through the motions and trying to do the right, the respectable thing. But this woman is different. She stays this side of polite to him, she makes the arrangements efficiently, almost clinically he would say. But there is a coldness, a dismissive contempt emanating from this woman that he senses and recoils from.

In the care home there is also a worker who is upset about her exclusion by the family from mourning one of her clients. A lovely old man she says to anyone who asks her, such a grand old man. And what a talker. Did he have a fund of stories to tell! He loved his cars didn't he? A Mercedes I think he mentioned. Several times. And a bit of a lady's man, oh yes. As old as he was she could easily work that one out about him. But for all that he'd had a loving marriage. Yes, he had talked about his wife a lot, told her many times over how lovely their relationship had been, how much he had missed her when she died. Oh yes, he'd been devoted to her hadn't he? Nursed her at home, all by himself, just him and her, looking after her, just devoted he was, until the end. A really special gent.

And then he'd had his hundredth birthday and got his telegram from the Queen. Ooh, right proud of that he was, wouldn't let them take it down. It had to stay up where everyone could see it. His granddaughter came with a cake but she'd seen to it herself that he got one from the home of course, and he sat up in his wheelchair and thoroughly enjoyed himself. Loved all the attention. Just loved it. Lapped it up. Talk about the birthday boy. What! And then the next day he wouldn't get out of bed. Said he was going now. He'd just waited to get to a hundred and he'd done it and now he was off. So

that was it. It happens at this age. It took him a few days. Talked a lot about going to Scotland, and the morning he died she was giving him his shave when he just looked straight at her and said that he was going on his journey today. And that's just what he did. Just slipped away. What a peaceful end for such a nice old dear, don't you think?¹²⁰

But afterwards she was a bit put out really, well, by his family. Of course everyone does things their way and you have to respect that, and of course grief does funny things to folk, but to be told so firmly that she couldn't go to the funeral – 'family members only' – well, it was a first for her. Normally, folk like to have someone there from the care home, the people who have seen to their relative to the last. And then to be told she couldn't send any flowers either. Well, she'd been a bit upset to be honest. And, truth told, thought it was all a bit odd like. You know? Something not quite right there.

The vicar thought the same. He had received a phone call from the undertaker that morning. Would he be able to do an internment that afternoon? No, not a funeral, no funeral was requested. Just a committal at the grave. Had a funeral been conducted somewhere else then? No, the remains were coming straight from the undertakers where they had been since the gent's death. He is taken aback. Surely there is a mistake? Did the family know he would be happy to waive the funeral fees if that was a

¹²⁰ I found this version of my father particularly difficult to listen to. It was a familiar view expressed by outsiders to the family over the years but no easier for that to hear again and particularly in this context. The only time I found myself in tears during this time was over my father's fictional version of the apparent care he gave to my mother in her last illness which the reader I think will understand. Several friends on hearing this asked me if I set the record straight. I did not. I have learned to appreciate much more keenly than previously through my exploration of narrative inquiry that each of us has our own narrative and that story was part of hers. Would it have helped her in her care work to know of the huge discrepancy between her version of my father and mine? That she had been 'taken in', made a fool of, according to his daughter? I think not. I chose silence.

problem? But it seems that all the family wants is the internment itself. No funeral. Just burial. So here he is waiting at the graveside, at two thirty on a Friday afternoon, waiting for the body and the family to show. He remarks to his wife as he sets off from the manse that in twenty three years in the job and seventy or eighty funerals a year, this one is a first.¹²¹

Now the hearse draws up at the open grave. The undertakers alight and confer briefly with the vicar. They are well known to each other, colleagues in death for many years. The complete absence of flowers is silently noted, as is the economy bottom of the range coffin. Undertaker and vicar look briefly at each other and raise questioning eyes towards a solitary car now making its way down the narrow path towards them. Yes here is the family, such as it is. Three, maybe four people alight and approach the graveside. The vicar moves forward and shakes their hands in turn, murmuring the standard condolences. The older woman, it is the daughter, turns abruptly to the undertaker and makes it clear that she wants the proceedings to begin without further ado. And so the coffin is lowered into its allotted space, the family stand motionless as the committal words are spoken, the vicar is thanked, and the family walks away.

It has taken three minutes.

The shortest goodbye on record. Well, that is, for one of this man's daughters. Except that it isn't a goodbye. Oh no, not a goodbye at all. It is rather a revenge. Well, of course. Indeed, what else, given the person who

¹²¹ I found the vicar to be an astute man. During our conversation he remarked that he had thought from the outset that someone had wanted to hide the body, and he also surmised on the basis of his experience that 'I think this grave will stay an unmarked grave.'

has calculated, calibrated, planned, longed for this moment? My god, how long has she had to wait for this man to die? This day, this extraordinary day has been a long time coming. Sixty years all told. The wait has been worth it. The hanging in instead of walking away after Mum died has paid off, handsomely. And the bonus has been to carve her sister out of the frame as well.

After she threw her sister out of her life she knew what she was going to do. Her sister never guessed her reasons for sticking with that bastard after Mum died, but she was owed, yes, owed big time by that man and she was going to get what she deserved. She would take him for every penny he had and she would get her revenge when the time came on both of them. All the pain, the grief, the humiliation borne for so many years, a lifetime of father and sister blighting her life for so long. They would pay, oh how they would be made to pay.

There had been the odd small, unforeseen glitch of course. One had happened three years ago when her sister had unaccountably turned up to see their father, somehow thinking he was on his death bed and might wish to have a reconciliation. She had soon seen her off. Realising that Dad had been pathetically pleased to see his youngest daughter again, ready to open his arms to her, she had swung into action.¹²²

¹²² I speculate here that my sister felt constrained to do this because now I was the one with the knowledge of a secret about *her*. This was her alcoholism, which she was astute enough to realise I now knew about, and about which my father, a lifelong Temperance advocate and teetotaler, would have been horrified and judgemental. More, he would not have hesitated to cut her out of the will. My belated contact with my father must have caused my sister some alarm, and unsurprisingly, she assumed that I might act on my secret knowledge just as she acted on hers. Control being everything, this could not be allowed to happen.

Oh yes, the tables were turned now. He was the one who was fragile, vulnerable, dependent. Just a hint that his dark secret might just have to be looked at brought him swiftly into line. So he told the social worker that it was best if he didn't see Susan again. The social worker reported back that he had cried. Then the social worker let slip that she liaised with Susan and had promised to keep her informed about her father's death. Another little talk with Dad had seen the social worker told that on no account must news of his death be given to his youngest daughter. The social worker would have been left feeling that she had no option but to comply with her client's request.¹²³

That was her sister taken care of. But this is a woman who leaves nothing to chance, particularly when it comes to an act of revenge anticipated for a lifetime. So when the news finally comes, finally, finally, thank god, that he is going, slipping away, she puts into operation the last part of her arrangements. Her father's body is to be taken out of the city of his birth, where he has lived all of his long, long life, worked in its forges, worshipped in its chapels. He is to be buried, not in the local grave plot which holds his wife's body, purchased by him for both of them and where he wished to be put, but instead miles away in a strange town, in an unknown cemetery, in an unmarked grave.

A fitting revenge. Such concealment makes it difficult for her sister to hear of his death and find his whereabouts, and in particular the contents of the will. But as satisfying as this is, much more important is her need to punish

¹²³ The subsequent apology I received from the social worker confirmed this speculation for me.

her father. As she was punished by him, over and over again, so she will do the same and more. She will banish him, obliterate him, *erase* him for ever.

Everything has gone to plan as she expects. The care worker at the home has been thwarted, no-one else knows of his death, and she will allow no funeral to dignify this man's dying. What kind of dignity had he ever allowed her? No, now she is in total control of his body and his wishes and his money.

A good day's work. The daughter sinks back in the car, now speeding down the motorway. She sighs, reaches down into her handbag placed strategically on the floor and takes a well practiced nip from a concealed container. She is good at concealment. Most alcoholics are. And her lessons in the art of concealment began a long time ago.

Concealment comes double-edged as some of us know. We conceal from others, yes, but also from ourselves. Alas, for some of us this insight stays always out of reach. For this moment Jean merely acknowledges her arts as practised against her enemies. And they are considerable.

Yes, she is very, very good at it. What began as an enforced concealment, terrorised into silence by the relentless abuse of the man she has just dumped into an always-to-be unmarked grave, she has practiced assiduously, turning a handicap, a disability, a painful vulnerability into an art, a breathtaking skill at manipulation, cunning, foresight, deviousness. It has become as much a part of her as her smile, her way of walking.

Over the years it has grown steadily until the day finally comes when the ability is lost to discern reality from distortion, abuser from victim, right from wrong. All connection is lost between her self and her soul.

We see only pain, betrayal, abuse, helplessness. We see only someone wounded so badly that to defend herself every waking minute is the only known response. We see only that the darkness, creeping in through the wound, takes hold, builds inexorably, festers, eats and destroys that which was good, that which was once beautiful and whole, until the self itself is consumed.

This woman who fought for so long to hold onto her self, her integrity, her soul, becomes in the end the thing most feared. She grows more and more into a likeness of the man whom her instincts have fought against since childhood.

It is not only her father she has just consigned to perdition.¹²⁴

She has, after all this, after such an heroic and unsung struggle, become the man, become the monster. In the act of burying him, she has become her father. And the darkness, like those still dark waters of so long ago which transfixed her with such horror, closes for the last time over her. Unseeing, lost to her sister, lost to herself, she speeds on down the road. The darkness moves with her, has found another resting place. Now it lies buried within her, a different kind of unmarked grave.

¹²⁴ As Miller (1987a) says, 'a house built out of self-betrayal will sooner or later fall down and mercilessly destroy human life – if not that of the builder, then that of his children...who will end up paying the full price' (p133-34).

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